

Social Construction and Relationalism: A Conversation with Kenneth Gergen*

Construcción social y relacionismo: una conversación con Kenneth Gergen

Recibido: enero 31 de 2012 | Revisado: febrero 20 de 2012 | Aceptado: abril 25 de 2012

JUAN C. ACEROS**

Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, España

SICI: 1657-9267(201209)11:3<1001:SCRCKG>2.0.TX;2-I

Para citar este artículo: Aceros, J. C. (2012). Social construction and relationalism: A conversation with Kenneth Gergen. *Universitas Psychologica*, 11(3), 1001-1011.

* Interview acknowledgments: The author wishes to express his gratitude to Ken Gergen for his open and friendly willingness to participate in the interview, as well as for reviewing various drafts of this paper. Special thanks go to Lupicinio Iñiguez for the information and photographic material provided in the process of elaborating the interview. The author also wishes to thank Facebook group 'Construccionismo Social' for the questions offered for the interview. Finally, a special thank you to Mary Gergen and Natalia Evnitskaya for reviewing the text.

** Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Facultat de Psicologia, Departament de Psicologia Social, Despatx B5/048. C.P. 08193 Bellaterra (Cerdanyola del Vallès), España. Telephone: 93 581 2353. E-mail: juancarlos.aceros@uab.cat

ABSTRACT

Kenneth Gergen is one of the most widely known contributors to social constructionist thought in the world today. Since the publication of his paper "Social Psychology as History" he has become a central player in what is known as *the Social Psychology Crisis*. In his academic career, and from what he has called 'Relational Theory', Gergen has revisited a significant number of psychological constructs and has proposed various dialogical and collaborative practices in therapy, organizational development, education, community development, social work and peace-building, among other things. This paper is a conversation with Gergen in which together we explore the particular way in which he understands the social constructionist movement. It is also a conversation about relational theory and related practices.

Key words author:

Kenneth Gergen, Social Constructionism, Relational Theory, Relational Practices, Relational Being.

RESUMEN

Kenneth Gergen es, actualmente, uno de los promotores más ampliamente conocidos del pensamiento socioconstruccionista. Desde la publicación de su artículo "Social Psychology as History" ha ocupado un lugar central en lo que se conoce como *la crisis de la Psicología Social*. En su carrera académica y desde lo que él ha llamado Teoría Relacional, Gergen ha revisado un número importante de constructos psicológicos y ha propuesto varias prácticas dialógicas y colaborativas en psicoterapia, desarrollo organizacional, educación, desarrollo comunitario, trabajo social y procesos de paz, entre otros campos. Este artículo es una conversación con Gergen en la cual se exploró conjuntamente su manera particular de entender el movimiento del construccionismo social. También es una conversación acerca de la teoría relacional y de las prácticas relacionales.

Palabras clave autores:

Kenneth Gergen, construccionismo social, teoría relacional, prácticas relacionales, ser relacional.

On a shelf full of books and magazines at the Department of Social Psychology at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, three gray figures of dragons with open jaws and sharp teeth can be distinguished. They represent relativism, postmodernism and constructionism: three protagonists of the so-called Social Psychology Crisis¹¹. Their disturbing presence in our daily lives is due to the initiative of Susan Condor and Stephen Reicher, who brought them for a small group meeting on 'Critical Social Psychology' (see, Ibáñez & Íñiguez, 1997) in Barcelona (Spain) in 1993. Nearly two decades after the arrival of these dragons at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, their meaning continues to permeate the work of the social psychologists trained there.

In the following pages, with the help of one of the major players involved in the Social Psychology Crisis, we will approach one of these beasts of critical social psychology: social constructionism. This term was coined in the sociology of knowledge by Berger and Luckmann (1966) and during the 1970s and 1980s it played an important role in the 'linguistic turn' in social sciences.² Today, instead of referring to a unified school, the term 'social constructionism' is used to identify the work of a vast variety of authors concerned with cultural, historical, socio-linguistic and context-dependent meaning-making processes. Trying to define what social constructionists have in common, Lock and Strong (2010) describe them as researchers who 'are interested in delineating the processes that operate in the socio-cultural conduct of action to produce the discourses within which people construe them-

selves' (p. 8) and within which our sense of reality becomes possible.

Among those who have contributed to the development and popularization of social constructionism are authors such as Jonathan Potter, John Shotter, Rom Harré and Kenneth Gergen. Among them, the last one is the best known in the field of psychology (Hibberd, 2005). Initially committed to discovering the laws of human social behavior through the experimental method, Gergen started his academic career in 1963 as Assistant Professor of Social Psychology at Harvard University. There, he also participated in activities carried out in the Department of Social Relations, which embraced the efforts of psychologists, sociologists and anthropologists in various teaching assignments. Surrounded by a rich academic and social context, Gergen began to feel dissatisfied with the discipline in which he was trained. Some private doubts about experimental social psychology began to emerge in him.

Gergen was asked "Where do you come from?" in an interview about his professional background by Mony Elkaïm in 1996. "Let's say that, in professional terms," he responded, "I was trained in experimental social psychology (...) Over the years, however, I have been examining the hopes and aspirations of this field with increasing disappointment. (...) On the one hand, they did not allow me to give any meaning to my life and, on the other, I was struck by the inherent transience of most of the phenomena we are faced with" (p. 12, our translation).³

Kenneth Gergen was given a teaching position at the Department of Psychology at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania in 1967. During his first years in that institution, he published several papers on conformity, personal consistency, self-

1 During the 1970's, an era of unrest interrupted the apparent consensus prevailing in social psychology. Two papers (Israel & Tajfel, 1972; Gergen, 1973) inaugurated a period of debate around the individualistic and experimental approaches, and universalizing assumptions in the social sciences. This period is known as 'the Social Psychology Crisis' (see, Ibáñez & Íñiguez, 1997).

2 The term 'linguistic turn', which was popular in the 1970s and 1980s, refers to a turning point that took place in philosophy and the social sciences, whose background should be traced back to the rise of modern linguistics and analytic philosophy. Initially, the term 'linguistic turn' meant an increase in the importance of language research, but it also led to a redefinition of communicative processes and meaning-making processes. For a review, see Ibáñez (2006).

3 In the original text in French this reads: "Disons que, d'un point de vue professionnel, j'ai été formé à la psychologie sociale expérimentale (...). Au fil des années, cependant, j'ai regardé les espoirs et les aspirations de ce champ avec une désillusion croissante. Par exemple, il m'est apparu assez vite que les théories et les méthodes de cette approche étaient fondamentalement problématiques, en cela qu'elles ne me permettaient même pas de donner un sens à ma propre vie, et le caractère intrinsèquement transitoire de la plupart des phénomènes auxquels nous étions confrontés me frappait aussi".



Figure 1. Kenneth Gergen on the occasion of his last visit to the *Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona* in 2007. Copyright 2007 by Juan C. Aceros.

presentation, personality and social interaction, social comparison, social attraction, and pro-social behavior, among other issues. In 1973 his career took a turn with the publication of “Social Psychology as History” in which he expressed his doubts about experimental research as a neutral reading of human social behavior and presented it instead as a form of social influence. The ideas articulated there gave rise to heated controversies which subsequently turned Gergen into one of the compulsory references of Critical Social Psychology and the protagonist of what he called ‘The Social Constructionist Movement in Modern Psychology’ in 1985.

According to Gergen (1985), social constructionism, is an approach that is “concerned with explicating the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live. It attempts to articulate common forms of understanding as they now exist, as they have existed in prior historical periods, and as they might exist should creative attention be so directed” (p. 267). As he has said more recently, constructionism is not about establishing a ‘foundational theory of knowledge’, but rather about opening up an “anti-foundational dialogue’ in which the emphasis is ‘on the social-discursive matrix from which knowledge

claims emerge and from which their justification is derived; the values/ideology implicit within knowledge posits; the modes of informal and institutional life sustained and replenished by ontological and epistemological commitments; and the distribution of power and privilege favoured by disciplinary beliefs” (Gergen, 1996, p. 77).

For Gergen, constructionism is basically a dialogue, i.e., a meaningful exchange between speakers, a social event, a co-active process. Doing social constructionism basically means talking: talking from and with certain convictions, hopes and values. This interview is part of such conversation: it asks Gergen about his encounters with his critics and fans, with authors from different disciplines, and with the public in general. It recalls some of the debates in which he participated and poses questions about the encounters between social constructionism and Spanish-speaking academic traditions, and it is in itself a dialogue. The following text is divided into three sections. The first one takes a predominantly biographical approach and presents Gergen to readers who are unfamiliar with his work. The second section raises some questions about the author’s particular way of understanding the social constructionism, which he calls ‘Relational Theory’. The last section deals with the ‘relational practices’ that have gradually become one of Gergen’s main concerns. These practices have recently transformed him into a tireless innovator in different fields of applied psychology.

Gergen and the Social Constructionist Movement

JCA: I would like to start this interview by focusing on your personal history, and especially on historical events in which you participated. Several decades ago, you proposed the idea that social psychology is a form of historical inquiry (Gergen, 1973). According to your arguments, theories of social behavior are historical undertakings. They are transient accounts of contemporary history. Furthermore, they are a form of history-making since such theories modify the patterns of behavior that they intend to describe and explain. With this

in mind, I would like to ask you the following: Do you think constructionism emerged to account for ongoing social events during the seventies? And, in what sense might we say that social constructionism has made history?

KJG: I do think the seeds for constructionism were planted during the events of the seventies, but I don't really think constructionism emerged as a means of accounting for these events. The thesis of the *Social Psychology as History* article could be viewed as a first step toward constructionism. That article did challenge several central presumptions in the empiricist philosophy of science from which the field drew its rationale. These included: first, the presumption of a cumulative or progressive science; second, the independence of the observer and the observed; and third, the value neutrality of science. However, at the time, I couldn't really see a clear alternative to empiricism. It was partly the avalanche of criticism provoked by the *Psychology as History* piece that inspired a search for ways to sharpen my arguments, and I didn't have far to look. The 'events of the seventies' had incited a widespread critique of status quo modernism, and implied in much of that critique - especially in the history of science, literary theory and critical theory - were arguments that could be assimilated into what would become the basis of a social constructionist alternative to empiricism.

Has constructionism 'made history'? There are certainly many ways in which this question can be answered affirmatively. Constructionist ideas now circulate widely across the social sciences and humanities, and even in some corners of the natural sciences and theology. This circulation is also global. Contrary to positivism - in which only 'empirically justified' accounts are honored - constructionist ideas invite all cultures to the table of deliberation. There is also the tremendous impact that constructionist ideas have had on various professional practices - in therapy, organizational development, education, community development, social work, peace-building, and the like. Modernism remains dominant, but the signs of transformation are everywhere.

JCA: The publication of "Social Psychology as History" was followed by a series of critical replies and even attacks on your work. Lock and Strong (2010) have described these replies as vociferous and personal, but at the same time highlighted your openness to dialogue. This openness would not be shown by your critics. In 1985, when you published *The Social Constructionist Movement in Modern Psychology*, you still anticipated a strong resistance against constructionist thought within the field of psychology. Resistance that you probably face quite often. Can you tell us a bit more about your attempts to have fruitful exchanges with those of your colleagues who have opposed your proposals? How receptive to constructive discussions about constructionism have mainstream psychologists been?

KJG: Constructive discussions with mainstream psychologists in the U.S. have been the most difficult, and here I would make a contrast with discussions in virtually the entire remainder of the world. There are many reasons for this. I think American culture in general is less intellectually oriented, with psychologists, much like the business community, simply wishing to get on with productive work (production). Deliberating about what one is doing is viewed as wasted time. Then there is the deep institutional entrenchment of positivism - with grant funds, journal publications, and advancement in the field, all tied to publishing experimental data. If this enterprise loses its rationale, so does the scientist lose direction, and indeed, his or her basis of self-respect.

There is also the problematic way in which constructionist arguments have often been put, and here I am guilty as well. Too often they are launched as a kind of annihilating critique, a critique that also takes on the demeanor of superiority, as if 'we know; and you are ignorant.' This form of the critique is really unfortunate, because it automatically puts the target on defense - as opposed to opening a space for mutual exchange. But in my opinion it also undermines one of the most important aspects of constructionist thought, namely, that there is no true or objective match between words and whatever exists. Thus, a constructionist does not occupy any kind of moral or ontological high ground



Figure 2. Kenneth Gergen and professors from the Department of Social Psychology at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona in 2006. Copyright 2006 by Lupicinio Iñiguez. Reprinted with permission.

From left to right: Josep María Blanch, Miquel Domènech, Teresa Cabruja, Juan Muñoz, Agnès Vayreda, Lupicinio Iñiguez, Kenneth Gergen, Mary Gergen, and Tomás Ibáñez.

from which to claim superiority. What's invited is a kind of humility, a recognition that 'we are all in this life together' and, if we wish to survive, or we have hopes for a better future, we need to work it out together.

JCA: One of the achievements of social constructionism is, without a doubt, the way it has spread throughout the world. Indeed, social constructionist ideas have been well received in many countries. So now I would like to ask you about the effect of your ideas in the Spanish-speaking countries, and I will begin by asking you about your contact with Spain. As a member of the Department of Social Psychology at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona (UAB), I know about your proximity to its doctoral studies program. Could you tell us a bit about this link? Specifically, could you tell us about your relationship with Tomás Ibáñez, a great promoter of social constructionism in Spain?

KJG: I am deeply indebted to Tomás Ibáñez and have treasured his friendship. He had independently been engaged in a critique of empiricist social psychology, and I think he found support in my early writings for the directions he was pursuing. He was responsible for several of my visits to Spain and to UAB, and those times together are very special to

me. Tomás is a brilliant and sophisticated scholar, and the kinds of questions he put to me, and the opinions he shared, were invariably insightful and growth-producing. I also admired so much the way in which he nurtured and inspired the younger generation of students around him. He was dedicated to their well-being and to seeing them into productive careers. For me, he was a model. There was a kind and gentle quality to Tomás that drew me—and many others—to him, and yet a tough and politically engaged intellect that was unswerving. He is a treasure.

JCA: The members of the Department of Social Psychology at the UAB have many fond memories of your visits. For example, Lupicinio Iñiguez, during a conversation that I had with him about this interview, referred to one such memory: your discussion with an American philosopher, John Searle, in a conference held in Gerona, Spain. In your book *Relational Being* (Gergen, 2009, p. 170) you describe the experience in some detail, so I will not ask you to do it here. However, I refer to this episode because it seems to represent clearly your academic work at the time. Lupicinio remembers that encounter as a clash between relativism and realism. Would you agree with this interpretation of what happened?

KJG: That is quite a reasonable interpretation, given Searle's other writings. In his early work on speech acts and intentionality he writes both as a realist and a dualist. In his 1995 book on the social construction of reality (written just after the Gerona meeting) he makes a strong distinction between institutional facts (socially constructed) and brute facts. The latter presumably exist independently of human interpretation. So, clearly, what seemed like ontological relativism to him was the enemy. Actually, my way of thinking about social construction is not ontologically relative. Rather, for me, constructionism remains ontologically mute. We cannot give an account of what really exists outside of one or another perspective or linguistic tradition. However, the intensity of that exchange was not simply intellectual. Searle is notorious for his bullying ways of engaging in dialogue. It's as if he loves nothing more than a good fight, and he will use

every rhetorical trick in the book to subdue what he seems to define as his enemies. Such exchanges are not particularly illuminating, and, in my view, they demean the tradition of intellectual exchange. Rather than mutual searching and deliberation we have mutual annihilation.

JCA: You recently made your first visit to Colombia, where you presented the ideas you had developed in *Relational Being*. As you told me on some other occasion, constructionist ideas are very much alive there and new creative practices are emerging. On the other hand, in *Construccionismo social: aportes para el debate y la práctica* [Social Constructionism: Contributions to the Debate and Practice], Estrada and Diazgranados (2007) assert that your work has impacted, in one way or another, Latin American researchers such as Ignacio Martín-Baró, Maritza Montero, Carlos Martín-Beristain, Elina Dabas, Marcelo Pakman, Carlos Sluzki and Dora Schnitmann. What can you say about the past and the present of the contact of your ideas with the Latin American reality?

KJG: I appreciate enormously the way in which scholars and practitioners in Latin America have not only engaged with constructionist ideas, but have found such impressive and creative ways to expand and enrich the dialogues. I never cease to learn from my interchanges with my Latin American colleagues. I am also deeply indebted to colleagues in Latin America who have found ways of bringing me to their countries. I have learned so much from these visits, and most importantly perhaps, enduring friendships have developed. Moreover, many of these relationships have resulted in a number of useful projects, including a PhD program, an international network of Spanish-speaking scholars and practitioners, several books, certificate programs, and new organizations built around constructionist ideas and practices.

Poetic Activism and Relational Theory

JCA: In a number of your texts you make reference to what you do, your academic career and your role in the constructionist movement, participating in conversations about issues such as truth, reality,

knowledge, meaning, emotions or the self. The use of many traditions in philosophy, the humanities and social research has been a way for you to open up spaces for those dialogues. On the other hand, in your work we can also appreciate a second form of conversation: an effort to bring constructionism to the general public. You are really interested in constructionist ‘conversations’ that could be done on the streets, and not only in classrooms, conferences and scientific publications. Is that your way of doing what you once called (Gergen, 1997) ‘poetic activism?’ That is, are you trying in this way to enable a psychology capable of increasing the discourse resources of the culture and thus encouraging positive transformations of society?

KJG: This attempt to break down the barrier between the scholarly community and the general public has been important to me for a long time. Constructionist ideas have been central to this attempt. This is partly because when you abandon the traditional notion that scientific disciplines generate pure or generalized knowledge, then you have to ask what the sciences do indeed offer to the world. This is an acute problem for the social sciences because they participate most directly in the meaning-making process within the culture more generally. So, if the facts generated in the social sciences are not often very important in themselves, then you begin to ask how social science can work to participate productively within the culture. And you are right, one of the ways I saw this potential was through what I called ‘poetic activism’, offering the culture forms of discourse that could enrich, empower, and enable.

However, my thinking on this has expanded since the 1997 work, and particularly in moving beyond discourse as the major offering. I currently think about this in terms of our participating with the culture in generating what you might call forms of life. Here action-research would be one major example in which we work with small groups to bring about social change. However, we can also bring our theoretical sensitivities into conversations in such a way that new practices emerge. The creation of *appreciative inquiry*⁴ would be a good example. It is

4 See, Cooperrider, Sorensen, Whitney, & Yaeger (2000).

also here that my work with the Taos Institute has become central to my life. You might take a look at the Taos website (www.taosinstitute.net) to appreciate the range of activities in which we are involved. Here it is all about linking social science and societal practice in such a way that both are enriched.

JCA: Some authors close to the social studies of science, particularly Bruno Latour, argue that science is 'politics by other means'. This idea seems to match well with your way of doing psychology. Specifically, in your attitude towards the ideology of individualism. Your texts directly attack individualism and denounce its pernicious effects. In addition, you propose an alternative theory called Relational Theory. Therefore, I would like to ask what this theory is and what it means in the context of the traditional debate between individualism and communitarianism. To clarify what you mean by relational theory, I think it is important to understand what you mean by 'relationship'. This word has many meanings. Even links that are not strictly social could be relationships. Consequently, this word is difficult to define. You have used terms like 'micro-social pattern' (Gergen, 1994) or 'co-action' (Gergen, 2009) to try to define your way of understanding relationships (which, I believe, is very close to Erving Goffman and Harold Garfinkel's perspectives). Furthermore, you have used various metaphors (such as 'conversation' or 'dance') with which you have attempted to provide a less formal and more embodied understanding of relationships. Could you summarize now what 'relationships' means in relational theory?

KJG: That's a very nice question, primarily because what I mean by 'relational' is radically different from the common understanding of the term. As the term 'relationship' is typically understood, it is the coming together of two fundamentally separate entities. Usually we mean the coming together of two or more fundamentally separate individuals. And, when they have formed a relationship, this too becomes an entity. Thus, for communitarians, for example, the community is the entity. What I attempt to do is to challenge the notion of entities, and to propose that there is a relational process that stands prior

to the concept of entities. As a constructionist, for example, one can say that the world of entities is a constructed world. If so, then what is the process out of which these constructions emerge? Let us take ordinary conversation as one of these processes. In our conversation we can construct each other as separate entities, or not, so entities are not foundational. So let's begin to look at the process of conversation as one of coordinated or collaborative action (co-action). When I say something, and you are not paying attention, I have essentially said nothing - a meaningless action. When you respond, however, you inject meaning into what I have said. So my meaning is not mine; it really depends on the coordinated action that follows. However, the action that follows is also without any meaning, unless I have said something. Thus, your meaning is not yours without me. In effect, in the process of coordination we are co-constituting everything we subsequently take to be real, rational, or good.

JCA: From the relational perspective that you propose, you have carried out a new reading of a significant number of psychological constructs. In this sense, you have cast doubt on the purely subjective nature of emotions, creativity, reason, etc. You have also thoroughly examined the issue of identity and self. In relation to that, many of your works could be mentioned. In *Realities and Relationships* (Gergen, 1994), for example, you present self-concept as a set of narratives and discourses on the self, what you call 'self-narratives'. In *The Saturated Self* (Gergen, 1991), you take a tour through the romantic, modern and post-modern self-related discourses and present the image of a contemporary self facing a growing number of social stimuli. In your latest book (Gergen, 2009), however, you decide to abandon the self as the object of your concern and, instead, use the concept of 'relational being'. I cannot help thinking that this is an important theoretical effort with which you expect to downplay the individual as the locus of identity. What do you expect to accomplish with this effort? Why is it necessary for relationalism to abandon the 'saturated self' and opt for the 'multi-being'?

KJG: As I see it, the move from the saturated self to relational being is not so much an abandonment as an extension. Yes, in the *The Saturated Self* I did say a great deal about our immersion in an ever-expanding array of social stimuli, as you put it. However, I also described the way in which we are called upon to play a far greater –and often incoherent– range of roles as we interact within an increasing and ever-more complex arena relationship. Or, you might say, we come to realize, in a way that we never quite understood in the culture of low technology, that what we call the self is inherently part of social process. Now, in *Relational Being*, I take this a step further. I propose that this process is a logical stage prior to the very idea of an individual self. This is not to say that we are determined by the process, because we are indeed part of it. The very idea of cause and effect becomes obsolete, as does the long-problematic distinctions between person and group, self and other, self and society.

JCA: Talking about your writings on the self, Lock and Strong (2010) conclude: “(...) anchoring ourselves in particular stories or descriptions of the self can constrain our resourceful and collaborative ways of interacting with others” (p. 303). The authors fall on your constant invitation to creativity, the construction of new self-related vocabulary, and new and varied ways of being a self. This invitation is no less provocative, especially for psychotherapists, but it faces what might be considered practical limitations which are beyond the linguistic scope. In this sense I remember Zygmunt Bauman, who in an interview with Benedetto Vecchi says that “after all, asking ‘who you are’ makes sense to you only once you believe that you can be someone other than you are; only if you have a choice, and only if it depends on you what you choose; only if you have to do something, that is, for the choice to be ‘real’ and to hold. But this is precisely what did not occur to the residents of the backwater villages and forest settlements –who never had a chance to think of moving places, let alone to seek, discover or invent something as nebulous (indeed, as unthinkable) as ‘another identity.’” (Bauman & Vecchi, 2004, pp. 47-48) What could you tell us about these limita-

tions Bauman finds in our ability to freely and dynamically reconstitute our identity?

KJG: I pretty much agree with Bauman’s proposal here, but would simply add that the idea of ‘moving places’ geographically is rapidly becoming obsolete. Instead we can talk in terms of the technological world described in *The Saturated Self*, in which multiple worlds, often compelling or attractive, are available to us –simply at the flick of a television remote or pressing the ‘return’ button on one’s computer or mobile phone. There is one significant difference between Bauman’s view and my own, concerning the increasing liquidity of being. Whereas Bauman, for example, in his book *Liquid Love*, still focuses on the uprooted individual and his or her skills in negotiating between freedom and security, I tend now to focus on relational process.

JCA: In an interview that Mony Elkaim had with you in 1996 and which he later published in the journal *Résonances*, you were speaking about the ‘disappointment’ that experimental social psychology produced in you. So, drawing from the word you chose, it could be said that the discipline did not respond to what you had imagined about it, or did not fulfill your expectations. However, such an interpretation implies the assumption that Kenneth Gergen is what you call a ‘self-contained entity’ whose words are a manifestation of his private inner-self. Reading the word ‘disappointment’ from an individualistic position would contradict what you have advocated throughout your career: when we talk about our emotions and feelings, we do not express our subjectivity, but we do rather form relationships. How then could we comprehend your disappointment with social psychology from a perspective that would be more faithful to constructionism?

KJG: First of all, you have to distinguish here between constructionism as a meta-theory on the one hand and as a working vocabulary for carrying on everyday life on the other. As a meta-theory –or a general orientation to knowledge claims of any kind– constructionism neither asserts nor denies any particular way of accounting for the world. Thus, from this meta-theoretical standpoint, individualist discourse is as legitimate as any other.

Thus, I may use individualist talk from time to time; one cannot participate in cultural life in the West without it. This does not mean that I hold it to be true, but it is a useful way to participate in ongoing relations of value. However, as a vocabulary for everyday life, I have made a lot of arguments—both conceptual and ideological—against individualism and psychologism, and attempted to generate a relational alternative. This alternative is most fully developed in my book *Relational Being: Beyond Self and Community*. I am not sure you want to go into it here, but in this work I try to show how psychological discourse can be viewed as socially performative. Thus, to speak of my disappointment is not to give a report on an event in the mind, but to engage in a relational action. I don't *have* disappointment 'in here,' so much as I am *doing* disappointment as an action that is intelligible and functional within a cultural tradition.

JCA: Despite your interest in exploring more social or relational accounts of identity, the concept of 'collective identity' does not appear in your writings. This concept has been particularly useful in fields such as research on collective action and social movements. One of the authors who have contributed to make it a major topic has been, without doubt, the Italian psychologist Alberto Melucci. In his work we can find a certain 'constructionist' accent when he argues that collective identity is 'constructed' and 'negotiated' through 'activation of social relationships'. In *Challenging Codes* (Melucci, 1996), he states: "Movements are systems of action, complex networks among the different levels and meanings of social action. Collective identity allowing them to become actors is not a datum or an essence; it is the outcome of exchanges, negotiations, decisions, and conflicts among actors" (p. 4). From your point of view, could the concept of 'collective identity', in the way Melucci uses it, have some utility for the relationalist approach to identity?

KJG: You are right to see the congenial 'accent', as there is considerable agreement in our emphasis on the 'interactive process' through which meaning is constructed. My reading of Melucci is that he wants to find a way of writing about the kind of identity one comes to acquire through participation

in social movements. 'Collective identity' is a useful concept for this purpose. Where I see Melucci and I differing, however, is in what I see as a Durkheimian (or macro-sociological) legacy in his work, where he wants to talk about 'groups' and larger 'systems' as having a reality *sui generis*.

Relational Practices

JCA: When the possibility of conducting this interview appeared, I found it interesting to address your readers in the search for interesting questions to ask you. One of the places I turned to in the quest for these readers and these questions was the Internet. There are different sites on the web where constructionist-minded people discuss your ideas and share resources related to your work. In one such sites, namely, a Facebook group that brings together psychology students and psychologists from Latin America and Spain, I asked these cybernauts about the questions they would like to ask you. To start talking about what you call 'relational practices', I would like to retrieve one of them. Some of those who responded to my request are interested in relationalism-based strategies to carry out scientific research. Mary Gergen (2001) has expressed her concern for a feminist psychology based on collaborative and inclusive knowledge-making practices that she calls relational science. You, on the other hand, have expressed your proximity to narrative inquiry and action research (Gergen, 2009). Could you briefly explain for us how a relationalist does his research?

KJG: The fundamental concern for championing research practices that are relational has to do with the impact of one's practices on the range of relationships. I am not chiefly concerned with any particular method or practice of inquiry so much as the relational matrix within which it takes place. Thus, for example, experimental methods may be able to accomplish certain ends, but in a relational sense they are deeply problematic. They treat the 'subjects' as aliens to whom they will not reveal their intent, and who can be manipulated at will. Further, the results of such work are seldom discussed with the subjects themselves, or for that matter,

with anyone outside the circle of experimentalists. And, the model of knowledge that is shared in academic courses is one that says our best knowledge of other persons is the result of distancing ourselves from them and manipulating them. In effect, the relational implications are inimical to our future well-being. Narrative research is far better in terms of its relational implications and action research typically superior to narrative research in this respect. But in what other ways could we carry out inquiry that would be even more beneficial to the broader sea of relationships in which we exist? Here lie exciting challenges to innovation.

JCA: As you have commented in several of your works (e.g. Gergen, 1994, 2009), the beginning of your career has been characterized predominantly by a task that could be called 'critical' to psychology. In this effort you have been accompanied by psychologists attached to what has been labeled as Critical Social Psychology, whose work has opened up exciting debates in psychology and the social sciences. Although it is undeniable that such debates have been, and continue to be, stimulating, sometimes the question emerges as to whether or not they have been, if I may say so, socially useful. In your most recent work you show a commitment to reducing such conflict. In fact, you have obviously worked hard to develop and promote 'relational practices' in fields such as organizational development, conflict management, psychotherapy and education. Among the various practices that you have managed to know in depth, which one is, in your opinion, the most inspiring?

KJG: First off, I do share some doubt about the ultimate utility of critical work. Such work is absolutely essential in terms of bringing multiple voices into deliberation on the nature, purpose, and impact of science on society. However, there are ways in which the critical movement has proved divisive and succeeded in generating resistance as opposed to transformation. I think it is the kind of self-righteous, holier-than-thou disposition that many critical theorists employ that is chiefly the problem. I say that as well from my own experience in working critically. So, in part what I am saying here is that if we are after social change, it may

be more effective in the long run to develop and nourish the alternatives. When people see what is possible, when they see that they can participate, then you have set the fire for change. For me one of the most impressive examples is the way in which the movement in the social sciences in the US has virtually transformed entire areas of study. And this is not simply a movement from one form of positivism to another; rather, carried within the qualitative movement are fundamental challenges to the positivist understanding of science, and an invitation for bold new ventures in what qualifies as legitimate and effective science. I must also add that it is the qualitative movement in American psychology that has the most promising potential to generate the kind of change embraced by a constructionist epistemology.

JCA: Returning to your contact with Latin America, I would not like to miss the opportunity to ask you about the relational practices that are being developed there. The particularity of the social problems that South American countries are faced with and the wealth of critical thought and action that has characterized many of their social scientists, promise the emergence of practices that are in a way different from those you refer to in your works—practices that are more consistent with the lifestyle of the so-called 'advanced countries'. Could you mention any original, relevant and appealing experiences in which we can find the germ of relational practices in Latin America?

KJG: I mentioned earlier that I always come away from my exchanges with Latin American colleagues deeply enriched. Let me here just mention some representative practices I have found inspiring in last year's travels to Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico. In Colombia I think of the work of Jeanette Samper and her colleagues. They are working with a hospital in Bogota where they are bringing into dialogue people from all parts of the hospital—doctors, nurses, administrators, cleaning maids, and more—to talk about how they might work together to make the hospital a more humane care center. Then, in Mexico, there is the Kanankil Institute in Merida, where they have developed an exciting range of collaborative therapeutic practices. In fact,

the Taos Institute will soon publish a book featuring these various developments. I must mention the collaborations currently taking place between Dora Schnitman in Buenos Aires, Jorge Sanhueaza in Santiago, and half-a-dozen colleagues from Latin America and Spain, in launching international certificate programs in dialogic and collaborative practices. I could go on to talk about so many other cases, and I have to tell you that I draw so much energy from these developments. Not only am I inspired by the creativity that is taking place everywhere, but I see the possibility of sharing such practices with the rest of the world, as examples of what is possible. The Taos Institute does its best to give these practices visibility. Much more needs to be done, but I do get a special thrill from thinking about the potential here for world change.

References

- Bauman, Z. & Vecchi, B. (2004). *Identity. Conversations with Benedetto Vecchi*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Berger, P. L. & Luckmann, T. (1966). *The social construction of reality: A treatise in the sociology of knowledge*. Garden City, NY: Anchor Books.
- Cooperrider, D. L., Sorensen, P. F., Whitney, D. & Yaeger, T. F. (2000). *Appreciative inquiry: Rethinking human organization toward a positive theory of change*. Champaign, IL: Stripes.
- Elkaïm, M. (1996). Le 'soi' en question: Assemblages et voix multiples. Dialogue entre Kenneth Gergen et Mony Elkaïm. *Résonances*, 9, 12-27.
- Estrada, A. M. & Diazgranados, S. (Comp.). (2007). *Construccionismo social. Aportes para el debate y la práctica*. Bogotá: Universidad de los Andes.
- Gergen, K. J. (1973). Social psychology as history. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 26(2), 309-320.
- Gergen, K. J. (1985). The social constructionist movement in modern psychology. *American Psychologist*, 40, 266-275.
- Gergen, K. J. (1991). *The saturated Self*. New York: Basic Books.
- Gergen, K. J. (1994). *Realities and Relationships*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Gergen, K. J. (1996). Metaphor and monophony in the twentieth-century Psychology of Emotions. In C. Graumann & K. J. Gergen (Eds.), *Historical dimensions of psychological discourse* (pp. 60-82). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Gergen, K. J. (1997). The place of the psyche in a constructed world. *Theory and Psychology*, 7(6):723-746.
- Gergen, K. J. (2009). *Relational being: beyond self and community*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gergen, M. (2001). *Feminist reconstructions in psychology: Narrative, gender and performance*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hibberd, F. J. (2005). *Unfolding Social Constructionism*. New York: Springer.
- Ibáñez, T. (2006). El giro lingüístico. In L. Iñiguez (Ed.), *Análisis del discurso. Manual para las ciencias sociales* (2.ª ed., pp. 23-46). Barcelona: Editorial UOC.
- Ibáñez, T. & Iñiguez, L. (Eds.). (1997). *Critical social psychology*. London: Sage.
- Israel, J. & Tajfel, H. (Eds.). (1972). *The context of social psychology: A critical assessment*. London: Academic Press.
- Lock, A. & Strong, T. (2010). *Social constructionism. Sources and stirrings in theory and practice*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Melucci, A. (1996). *Challenging codes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

