Social constructionism in (con)text

Book review

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

REFERENCES.


The social constructionist perspective contends that individuals and their differences are created or constructed through social processes (e.g., political, religious, and economic) rather than an innate quality within the individual. Furthermore, the categorization of individuals into groups explains more about how society functions than about individuals. Social constructionism is contrasted to essentialism. Essentialist ideas can exist within the framework of social constructionism but social constructionism cannot fit into the framework of essentialism. Also called: constructed reality, constructionism, social construction, social construction of reality, social constructionist perspective. Social constructivism is a sociological theory of knowledge according to which human development is socially situated and knowledge is constructed through interaction with others. Like social constructionism, social constructivism states that people work together to construct artifacts. While social constructionism focuses on the artifacts that are created through the social interactions of a group, social constructivism focuses on an individual's learning that takes place because of his or her... Social constructionism insists that we take a critical stance toward our taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world and ourselves. It invites us to be critical of the idea that our observations of the world unproblematically yield its nature to us, to challenge the view that conventional knowledge is based upon objective, unbiased observation of the world. It therefore opposes what is referred to as positivism and empiricism, epistemological positions that are characteristic of the "hard" sciences such as physics and biology. Positivism and empiricism. What is social constructionism? 3....