

Constructing Our Future

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A defining feature of the postmodern era has been the challenging of assumptions about the nature of truth and reality. Iconoclastic ideas (such as the existence of multiverses), challenges to taken-for-granted dichotomies (such as fact and fiction), reconceptualizations of formerly “unassailable” concepts (such as mind and emotion), and critiques of the presumed authoritative bases of knowledge (such as objectivity) have shaken once-secure beliefs. Postmodern sensibilities also have found expression in social work practice, research, and education. New perspectives on social work knowledge and practice (Dean & Fleck-Henderson, 1992; Laird, 1995; Sands & Nuccio, 1992), critiques of the privileged status of empirical knowing (Weick, 1991), proposals for alternative inquiry approaches (Rodwell, 1998), reinterpretations of social work history (Tyson, 1995), and educational course offerings in “alternative epistemologies” (Saleebey, 1998) illustrate postmodernism’s influence on social work.

In the broad sweep of postmodernism, the movement known as “social constructionism” has generated considerable interest. Not a unitary theory, but a broad framework for understanding, social constructionism reflects the confluence of three critiques of the dominant knowledge establishment (see Gergen, 1994a, 1994b, for a more extensive discussion of these critiques):

- ideological critiques that focus on the mechanisms through which knowledge is controlled by and serves dominant interests in society—These critiques are most closely associated with critical theory and, more recently, with some forms of feminist philosophy.
- literary and rhetorical critiques that demonstrate how what can be known is bounded by literary conventions and pre-

vious textual knowledge and that no one meaning of a text is sacrosanct—These critiques have been associated with approaches such as deconstructionism and reader response theory.

- social critiques that foreground the historical and cultural contexts of knowledge, the social mechanisms that sustain certain theories, and the social processes of knowledge development—These critiques have their modern roots in sociology, the development of interpretive approaches to human sciences, and advances in the history and philosophy of science.

Common to these critiques—and a centerpiece of constructionism—is a rejection of the notion that language corresponds in a direct way with the “real world” and an emphasis on how language functions in social life. For the constructionist, the relationship between language and things in the world is indeterminate; that is, there is no necessary connection between objects, actions, and states and what they are called. Rather, than reflecting the world, language generates it. Pearce (1992) wrote: “In contrast to the venerable myth that words have meanings because they represent either things ‘out there’ in an objective world or ‘in the minds’ of their users, constructionists emphasize the formative function of language and its inseparability from human actions” (p. 149). In other words, language and meaning are the products of human interchange.

The primary functions of language are to coordinate and regulate social life (Gergen, 1994a). Following Wittgenstein, constructionists view the meaning of words as related to their use in various contexts where “contexts” also are constituted by language (Pearce, 1992). For example, suppose an individual observes what appears to be someone picking up a person from

the ground. Is this an act of helping, or might it be an array of other acts, such as harm, altruism, prejudice, ritual, or dance? Before knowing whether this action qualifies as help, I need information about

- the immediate context of the action, for example, the relationship between the individuals
- the linguistic traditions within which the word help is embedded. These traditions enable us to use words intelligibly. For instance, the meaning of "help" is based in part on its relationship to other words such as "harm" and "nurture." Understanding these relationships helps us know when applying a particular term makes sense.
- the cultural parameters of help; that is, the kinds of actions or situations recognized as help within a particular "language community." How many of us have assumed we were helping someone only to discover that our actions had a different meaning for the recipient of our "help." Although the meaning of an action may be individually designated, intelligibility is communal (Shotter, 1993).

Describing an event as help also has a prescriptive function (Gergen, 1994b)—that of delineating the constituent features of help. Negotiating agreement that something called "help" has occurred either reinforces or revises existing definitions. Consider, for example, how definitions of abuse, neglect, psychological problems, intelligence, harassment, and rape have been renegotiated and revised over the past several years. In each case our descriptions prescribe or proscribe certain characteristics and actions.

The instrumental functions of language link it to people's interests and values. Our linguistic resources tend to reflect dominant groups in society. As Marcuse asserted more than 30 years ago, "In speaking their own language, people also speak the language of their masters, benefactors, and advertisers" (cited in Ingram, 1990, p. 86). Similarly, author and naturalist Terry Tempest Williams writes of "the language women would speak if no one were there to correct them" (cited in Pearlman, 1993, p. 122). To the extent that our linguistic terrain is de-

finied by others, our discourse will reproduce their realities and interests. Thus, it is easier to speak in person-centered terms than in communal ones, easier to describe clients in terms of their deficits than in terms of their strengths, and easier to recite corporate verities—despite their obvious commercial aims—than to create a language of justice. "Words create worlds," according to Hartman (1991). The world does not furnish us with the terms of its representation; rather, the way we communicate about the world will determine what it will be. Consider how characterizing human suffering in the language of deficits generates one sort of reality and societal response, whereas depicting human suffering as a heroic struggle invites another. Or how describing human development as a series of invariant stages suggests certain methods and criteria for evaluating individuals, whereas viewing development as plastic, dynamic, and culturally prescribed suggests other strategies.

Replacing the metaphor of "language as a mirror" with that of "language as a tool" creates space for marginalized forms of knowledge and discourse, for new approaches to inquiry and practice, and for expanded criteria for evaluating knowledge claims. New challenges arise.

Instead of trying to decide whose representation of reality is closer to "truth," we must decide how to choose between competing interpretations. Rather than granting privilege to one form or source of expression, we must decide how to hear and assess different discourses from within their own contextual frame. Rather than operating from a position of certainty, we are faced with reconceptualizing approaches to education, research, and practice (for example, Witkin, 1990) that have assumed one reality and the privileged access to it by the teacher, researcher, or practitioner.

Social Constructionism and Social Work

Although this brief description of social constructionism is far from comprehensive, I am struck by its congruence with social work. From its origins as an alternative voice to the hegemony of the prevailing knowledge establishment to its emphasis on the social dimensions of human life, social constructionism echoes social work's values and mission. Social workers,

like social constructionists, tend to question dominant knowledge structures—for example, official explanations of poverty—and are sensitive to the influence of history and culture. We recognize that current models for understanding people in need—even our ways of identifying need—are shaped by economic, political, and ideological factors. How these models construct the problems we address and how they influence the services we provide are of paramount importance. Thus, for example, both social workers and constructionists might ask how current models of child welfare practice favor certain views about children and who benefits from or is harmed by such views.

As the example illustrates, exposing the values embedded in theories and practices and assessing their implications is an important task. An example from Prilleltensky (1997), although directed toward psychologists, highlights the important interrelationships among values, assumptions, and practices:

If we value self-determination very highly, we are likely to assume that in order to be psychologically healthy, most people should behave autonomously. These ideas, in turn, will influence practice. Research efforts and therapy will be directed at promoting independence. [In contrast, those] who value interdependence are likely to define problems of clients in social, as opposed to intrapsychic, terms. Following from this, they may have a vision of a good society in which collaboration and reciprocity are more important than personal success. (p. 519)

The congruence of social work and social constructionism places the profession in a position to exercise leadership in the translation of constructionist thought into research and practice. Instead of emulating conventional forms of practice and inquiry, constructionism provides a vehicle for extending our unique professional identity and societal agenda. Who are better prepared than social workers to practice the “scholarship of dislodgement” (Gergen, 1994a); to amplify and legitimate subjugated knowledge; to challenge “oppressive constructions of gender, prejudice, sexuality, childhood, colonialism, race and racism, madness, [and] dis-

ability” (Stenner & Eccleston, 1994, p. 97); and to expose the knowledge–power connection and the professional-as-expert whose knowledge is privileged (Weick & Saleebey, 1995)?

Ultimately, our vision of a just society and the kinds of relationships that such a society should support will guide our work. For social workers and social constructionists, this vision requires that we encourage, facilitate, and legitimate diverse knowledge traditions and forms of expression. There is no intrinsic reason, apart from the interests of particular groups, to privilege one form of writing and speaking or to limit knowledge claims to certain criteria. Each form of writing or speaking is an expression of a different language community (Gergen, 1994a) and serves the purposes of that community (for example, promoting cohesion among its members). However, we social workers believe that it is important for those who are silenced—for whatever reason—to have a voice. We also tend to believe that those who are marginalized in society have a perspective that is valuable for the rest of us to hear.

Social Work can be one place where these values are expressed. Doing so will require opening the journal to multiple voices and forms of expression. For example, the voices of our clients are conspicuously absent from the pages of *Social Work*, yet their knowledge is crucial if we are to serve them meaningfully. How can we enable their voices to find expression in our journal? Some possibilities: Encourage clients to write about their experiences—in their words and from their perspectives; consider cowriting with your clients; and encourage those who have experienced both practitioner and client roles to share the knowledge gained from this dual perspective. Undoubtedly, there are other ways to accomplish this goal, and I welcome your ideas. I also welcome your submissions and will create the journal space for their expression.

Social Work also can be a site where the rules of discourse—what we can talk about—for research and practice are questioned. The nature of our critical inquiries and analyses need not be defined by the targets of those inquiries and analyses. For instance, it is as important to know the values embedded in theories of human

behavior, methodological doctrines, institutional policies, and models of practice and supervision as it is to know "outcomes." Issues of power can be considered critical factors in the assessment of practice and inquiry. Expressions of knowledge that seek legitimacy, not in their conformity to authority-conferring criteria but in their authenticity and ability to energize people to change their oppressive social conditions, can be given space in our public forums.

Breaking rules entails risk. In my view, if *Social Work* is to carry out its responsibilities of providing leadership, raising important questions, addressing important issues, and encouraging knowledge development that will support social workers' professional mission, it must not shy away from controversy. I invite thoughtful papers that expand and enrich our conversation. ■

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