

Epistemological, Social, and Political Conundrums in Social Constructionism

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Abstract: This article critiques the central premise of social constructionism, namely that groups of people freely construct beliefs about things and that beliefs are "local truths" which must be honored by outsiders and cannot be evaluated by external criteria. I argue that eliminating truth claims makes all beliefs arbitrary and eliminates the very notion of error. This leads to accepting what are in fact false and dangerous beliefs. It also leads to dogmatic cults of divergent social groups maintaining any belief system they want, and rejecting in principle all criticism or need improvement. The resulting social fragmentation prevents mutual understanding and communication. While social constructionism claims to be radically anti-modernist, i.e., anti-capitalist, the social fragmentation and uncritical thinking it promotes, exactly reflect the practices of capitalists who work for their own self-interests, disregard community concerns, and dismiss factual evidence about capitalism's negative effects on the environment, health, and society. I propose that real community and understanding require an acceptance of "modernist" scientific principles that can critique harmful practices and design social reform.

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1. The Social Constructionist Position

In her comments on my critique of social constructionism (RATNER 2004), Barbara ZIELKE (2005) raises a number of important points and questions about the nature and implications of social constructionism. Before addressing her comments, let me review GERGEN's words and my critique so we have a clear basis of discussion. [1]

Describing social constructionism, GERGEN says:

- "To tell the truth, on this account, is not to furnish an accurate picture of what actually happened but to participate in a set of social conventions ... To be

objective is to play by the rules within a given tradition of social practices ... To do science is not to hold a mirror to nature but to participate actively in the interpretive conventions and practices of a particular culture. The major question that must be asked of scientific accounts, then, is not whether they are true to nature but what these accounts ... offer to the culture more generally" (GERGEN, 2001, p.806).

- "A postmodern empiricism would replace the 'truth game' with a search for culturally useful theories and findings with significant cultural meaning" (ibid., p.808).
- "Arguments about what is really real are futile" (ibid., p.806).
- "Declarations of truth beyond tradition are, in this sense, a step toward tyranny and, ultimately, the end of communication" (GERGEN in the interview conducted by MATTHES & SCHRAUBE, 2004, para.13). [2]

2. My Critique

GERGEN is discussing the social constructionist approach to factual issues. His citations do not refer to moral issues. My critique was similarly limited to factual, scientific issues. In my critique I focused upon a few social and epistemological implications (I address a wider range of issues in my book, *Cultural Psychology: A Perspective on Psychological Functioning & Social Reform*). I argued that GERGEN's epistemology encourages cultism and dogmatism. He says that truth is only a matter of social convention, playing by the rules of a particular group. There is no truth beyond what the group believes. Any attempt to judge a local truth is tyranny. This is the dictionary definition of dogmatism. Dogmatism is a collective belief system that resists modification on the basis of evidence. A cult is a group of people that adheres to a dogmatic belief system. Honoring local truths that are devoid of evidence, and dismissing criticism of local belief systems as tyrannical, encourage dogmatism and cultism. [3]

Social constructionists believe that if they deprive beliefs of truth claims, this will loosen peoples' attachment to beliefs and make them open to alternatives. However, eliminating truth claims makes all beliefs arbitrary, hampers attempts at falsification and thus strengthens attachment to them. There is no reason for any group to accept another group's opinions. The latter are no truer than the former. Nor can the latter critique any fallacies in the former because there are no standards of criticism, and criticism would be tyrannical and judgmental. A group may voluntarily decide to adopt other opinions, but there is no reason to, and little likelihood of doing so. [4]

GERGEN's statements give free reign to the worst prejudices and absurdities. A group of people is free to declare that the earth was formed in seven days, that the Holocaust never happened, that global warming is not occurring, that Jesus was born from a virgin birth, and that women are innately dumber than men. No one can object because each is a local truth, an interpretive convention, that is culturally useful to the group and represents the way the group plays the game of acquiring and assessing information. No outside evidence can be marshalled because there is no truth beyond the local group. No outside evaluation is

tolerated because that is a different local truth arrived at by different rules of the game. In fact, outside evaluation is tyranny! According to this, no belief is falsifiable! You can believe whatever you want. This is intolerance of other viewpoints, not tolerance. You can stick to your beliefs regardless of what others say and demonstrate. You allow them to have their ideas but they have no necessary influence on yours. You are justified to dismiss others as incommensurable interpretive conventions and cling to your given ideas. [5]

Social constructionism denies the existence of errors. Beliefs are simply opinions. They can never be wrong because they are not trying to describe anything real. Error is only defined against some reality that is misperceived. If there is no reality, or we can never perceive it, there is nothing to be mistaken about. [6]

With errors eliminated by definition, there is no need to, or way to, correct them. No opinion is more correct than any other. [7]

These are the inexorable logical conclusions that follow from social constructionism. [8]

I argue that a form of realism—critical realism, not naïve realism—can overcome cultism, dogmatism, and error. Realism is based upon the principle that a real world exists and can be increasingly known through various kinds of evidence. Objective knowledge is accumulated gradually through intellectual struggle, and it is always incomplete. However, there is no question that scientists understand a great deal about physical matter and are able to use this understanding quite effectively; for example, to send people to the moon, cure disease, and generate electrical power. We can use this information to disconfirm local beliefs, however useful they may be to a culture. Although it is culturally convenient for the Catholic Church to believe that Jesus was born from a virgin birth, science refutes this cultural belief. Although it is culturally convenient for a tribe of Indians to believe that a rain dance causes rain, science refutes this cultural belief. Although it is culturally convenient for Bush's imperialism to believe that Hussein had weapons of mass destruction, empirical inquiry refuted that notion. [9]

Science breaks down cultism, dogmatism, authoritarianism, blind faith, and error. This is exactly what science did at the end of the Middle Ages; it democratized knowledge by making it empirically based. Any authoritarian proclamation could be challenged by empirical evidence. [10]

Science also provides a basis for general agreement about a real world. There is a common fund of evidence, theory, and methods that lead to generally accepted conclusions. Without science, a belief in the really real, and humility in the face of evidence, there is no corrective to cultism, dogmatism, authoritarianism, and error. [11]

Of course, science does not guarantee agreement and openness to evidence. Dogmatists in religion, politics, business, psychology, and social constructionism refuse to accept scientific evidence. This does not invalidate science. [12]

EINSTEIN advocated critical realism as the epistemology of science. He emphasized the intellectual struggle to discover unobservable properties of things, and to compose theories that coherently represent scattered empirical evidence. Knowledge is not a simple, mechanical process of receiving sense impressions. Yet knowledge is always grounded in empirical evidence and represents our best understanding of the single reality confronting us. Discussing the question of diverse scientific theories he said:

"Can we ever hope to find the right way? Nay, more, has the right way any existence outside our illusions? ... I answer without hesitation that there is, in my opinion, a right way and that we are capable of finding it" (EINSTEIN, 1954, p.274).

"The development of physics has shown that at any given moment, out of all conceivable constructions, a single one has always proved itself decidedly superior to all the rest. Nobody who has really gone deeply into the matter will deny that in practice the world of phenomena uniquely determines the theoretical system, in spite of the fact that there is no logical bridge between phenomena and their theoretical principles" (ibid., p.226). [13]

EINSTEIN flatly contradicts the subjectivism, nihilism, and pluralism of social constructionism. His comments apply to social science as well as physics. Social science seeks to explain a real world of phenomena (e.g. cultural factors and processes and how these affect psychological phenomena), and explanations are more or less objective and more or less acceptable. Of course, the researcher always affects the object of research. Introducing measuring instruments affects the physical environment and the social environment to some extent. However, this does not preclude gathering objective information. The Hubbel telescope in space records light waves of distant objects despite the fact that it is an artefact we put into space. Similarly, a good psychologist elicits the ideas and emotions and meanings of an individual despite being an artefact in the individual's life world. The psychologist can utilize various procedures to remain unobtrusive, or put the individual at ease and elicit more objective information than the individual disclosed to other people or even to himself/herself. DILTHEY used the term "Besser verstehen" to express the fact that the well-trained researcher can enhance the objectivity of information. Research does not necessarily prejudice information. [14]

3. ZIELKE's Comments and My Response

ZIELKE suggests that I should distinguish among forms of realism and identify the one that I endorse. That is a good point, and I do differentiate critical realism from naive realism. [15]

ZIELKE disagrees with my conclusions. She says that social constructionists do encourage dialogue and diverse opinions rather than dogmatism and cultism. They just do not tie dialogue and diversity "to the fixed objective of either reaching 'truth' or an otherwise commonly shared perspective" (ZIELKE 2005, para.5). This means that people engage in dialogue just for the sake of talking;

for the intellectual stimulation and metaphors that it generates. There is no striving for agreement on a commonly shared perspective. There is no striving to discover truth about reality. [16]

It seems to me that ZIELKE falls into the conundrum I explained above. Her *desire* for dialogue is contradicted by the principles and logic of her theory. Accepting diverse opinions that are ungrounded in any evidence about things and have no truth value is a license for any group to cling to any belief they find culturally appealing. [17]

4. The Social-Political Basis of Social Constructionism

Social constructionist epistemology has a social-political basis. This basis is individual, or group, freedom. Individuals, or groups, are free to construct the world any way they collectively choose. They are not bounded by physical reality or by social pressure from others outside their group. Neither physical facts nor pressure to agree with outsiders can alter a group's belief system. Constructionists achieve this by denouncing physical facts as reification, and by denouncing social pressure for agreement as tyranny. Subjective epistemology is based on, and justifies, bourgeois freedom. [18]

Social constructionism validates every opinion of every group. Nobody can be wrong about anything since there is no-thing to be wrong about. All opinions are equally laudable. Beliefs are valued simply because they express the agency and perspective of a group, or because they offer a new and different perspective on things. This abstract, indiscriminate adulation of beliefs jettisons truth and rationality. [19]

Critical realism, in contrast, maintains that people are bounded by a real physical and social world. They need to acknowledge this reality and necessity in order to achieve their goals. They cannot wishfully dismiss physical and social reality. If humanly-produced pollution is causing disease and environmental degradation, we must stop polluting if we desire to live healthy lives. And if vested commercial and political interests deny this fact, they should be convinced through group pressure and laws. This is hardly tyranny, as GERGEN insists. Social pressure based upon objective scientific evidence that strives to preserve the health of the world's population and the ecosystem of the planet can only be construed as tyrannical from the point of view of bourgeois individualism that subordinates social responsibility to egocentric self-interest. [20]

5. A Flawed Conception of Agency and Culture's Relation to Knowledge

Social constructionists believe that since beliefs rest upon cultural concepts and active interpretation they cannot objectively comprehend a real world. This notion presumes that culture and agency are antithetical to apprehending a real world: All interpretation is prejudiced by cultural concepts and individual meanings. This is a false dichotomy that seriously misunderstands culture and agency. It fails to recognize that culture and agency can enhance objectivity. Some cultural concepts are mythical. Examples are the virgin birth of Jesus, the idea that hysteria is caused by a floating uterus, the belief that Saddam Hussein had ties to Al Qaeda. However, certain cultural concepts are objective. The concept of a gene is an example. A gene is a cultural construct. However, it accurately reflects reality, and enables us to predict and affect reality. The fact that it is a cultural construct does not preclude objectivity. You may not like some of the uses that are made of the cultural concept, gene, however, that does not nullify the objectivity of the term. In fact, the only reason that it can be put to adverse uses is because it is objective and has real effects. [21]

In the same way, some interpretation is biased. However, physicians interpret x-rays, and astronomers interpret sound and light waves to detect real properties of matter. In the humanities, the 2,000 year old history of hermeneutics, from ancient Greece to DILTHEY, is based on the possibility of a rigorous, objective interpretation of textual meaning. Interpretation connected the observer to an external world by enabling him or her to apprehend it. [22]

Thus, to say that all knowledge/belief is mediated by interpretation and culture does not deny an objective comprehension of a real world. The enormous power of humans to objectively comprehend reality is enabled by our ability to reason, interpret, and form cultural constructs. [23]

Interpretation became subjectivized—construed as the mere expression of subjectivity that biases knowledge and turns away from the external world—only recently, in the hermeneutics of HEIDEGGER. GADAMER, HEIDEGGER's student, went so far as to complain about the Enlightenment's "prejudice against prejudice." GADAMER sought to make prejudice acceptable in philosophy and social science. This subjectivistic turn has alarming implications. It frees psychiatrists to express their prejudices in diagnosing women as irrational. It frees any woman to make reckless charges that a man is sexist or abusive. It frees police and judges to express their prejudices in regarding Arabic people as terrorists. It frees teachers to express their prejudices that lower class students are incapable of learning. [24]

6. On Important Issues, Everyone is A Critical Realist, Not A Social Constructionist

Nobody believes or practices social constructionism consistently. On important issues everybody believes in a real world that is knowable through evidence and logical reasoning, and which commands general agreement. [25]

Even ZIELKE and GERGEN lead their lives on the basis of evidence about real things. They utilize factual evidence to discredit the beliefs of people and to convince them of the truth of certain facts such as: the Holocaust was a real, terrible tragedy; global warming is a serious danger; women have the same innate intellectual capacity as men; human birth only occurs through sexual intercourse; Hussein had no weapons of mass destruction; and the earth was formed over billions of years. On such matters ZIELKE and GERGEN do not happily accept diverse opinions devoid of scientific evidence. [26]

Similarly, when Barbara has a pain in her arm, she wants to know what the cause really is. She is not satisfied to hear a plurality of opinions that are culturally useful to diverse doctors and that are ungrounded in evidence. She would be frantic if one doctor said, "It would be futile for me to pretend to know what is really real about your arm (or whether you really have an arm, or are really a human being). I can simply be reflexive about my perspective. For me it is culturally useful to believe your arm is broken. But I am not claiming that is true." Imagine if Barbara sought a second opinion and heard another doctor say, "Well, as a woman my reflexive viewpoint leads me to interpret your pain as a tumor. Of course, I am not claiming this is true." And another doctor says, "As a Chinese, I believe your pain is psychosomatic due to too much *qi* in your system. Of course, I make no claim to mirror any reality." Barbara, like everyone else, wants a single, objective *truth* that is confirmed by many doctors who all base their evaluations on objective theories and evidence. She believes in *Allgemeingültigkeit*, not local truths. [27]

Similarly, on a psychological level, if a psychiatrist tells Barbara that she is stupid and crazy and a menace to herself and to society, and she must be committed to a psychiatric hospital, Barbara will say "That is *not true*. You are *wrong*. *In fact*, I am not stupid or crazy. Your opinion of me is prejudiced and subjective, it does not *reflect* (mirror) my psychological reality. Your opinion is dangerous and you should *change* it." She will get *confirmation/agreement* from other respectable people that her self- assessment is *true* and has *Allgemeingültigkeit*. She will not say "You have an interesting interpretation of me that is culturally useful to you, which I respect, and would love to dialogue about." [28]

ZIELKE's real life behavior and thinking refute the tenets of social constructionism that she espouses in her academic discourse. [29]

7. Cultural Psychology and Social Constructionism

ZIELKE asks how I can be a cultural psychologist and be so critical of social constructionism. Is not cultural psychology a form of social constructionism? My answer is that cultural psychology is an objective science. It studies how psychological phenomena are part of culture, originate in cultural factors, embody cultural factors, and function to support cultural factors. Cultural psychology studies the cultural reasons for psychological variations in different societies. There are definite, objective cultural factors and processes that generate psychological variations. This is not a matter of opinion. We utilize evidence and logical reasoning to understand this subject matter. I accept social constructionism's point that there is a cultural basis to our psychology. However, I agree with DILTHEY, MARX, DURKHEIM, and VYGOTSKY that this cultural basis can be objectively known in each case (cf. RATNER, 1997, 2002, 2007). [30]

I believe that the subjective turn in cultural psychology and social science in general, represents a dangerous direction that must be opposed. [31]

8. The Politics of Social Constructionism

This is why I aggressively criticize social constructionism. I see it as reflecting and also encouraging social disintegration and intellectual degeneration. I see social constructionism as reflecting and promoting cultism and dogmatism in society at large. It gives people license to believe anything they want, regardless of how absurd, fanatic, or reactionary, under the claim that it is their interpretive frame and is culturally useful to them. Social constructionism precludes recognizing errors and criticizing errors. It provides no basis for social reform because all suggestions for reform are reduced to mere opinion and personal preference. They have no more justification than opinions resisting reform. WOLIN (2004) explains how this seemingly progressive viewpoint is actually quite conservative and powerless to alter the status quo. [32]

The scientific deficiencies and political dangers of social constructionism warrant aggressive repudiation of it. [33]

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