

Not "Anything Goes." A Critical Assessment of Constructionism and Its Misinterpretation. A Comment on Carl Ratner's "Epistemological, Social, and Political Constructionism"

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Abstract: First, the article discusses some popular confusion caused by a superficial (and extreme) interpretation of the constructionist meta-theoretical position. Second, a number of versions of critical realism are discussed as an alternative which is to be respected, but may be critiqued as being prone to the (ideological) presupposition that some entities are "beyond construction." Third, the more severe problems of constructionist meta-theory are sketched and criticized: i.e., the implications of a psychology without subject and a notion of cultural practice that denies any kind of agency to its participants. Finally, and to invite future projects, a case is made for a pragmatist refinement of the constructionist position.

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1. Truth Claims and Their Dismissal: Implications and Misinterpretations

Again it is constructionism's stepping back from absolute "truth claims" or "descriptive validity" which seems to disconcert RATNER (2005) the most; thus he begins his comment by quoting certain remarks by GERGEN (2001a) where the latter refers to the various implications of the assumption that scientific truths are subject to social practice and social conventions and objectivity is subject to cultural and historical contingency (GERGEN, 2001a; RATNER, para.2). [1]

In my view, GERGEN's statements are far from being the most controversial ones in constructionist writings. In what RATNER chose to cite in order to demonstrate the worst flaws of social constructionism, GERGEN more or less repeats standards of post-empiricist philosophy of science, implicitly referring to the well-defended positions of KUHN (1962) or RORTY (1979). Briefly: Scientific practice, its "objective" findings as well as "objectivity" itself are results of rhetorical and practical conventions of the scientific community and of society at large. Science does not hold a mirror to nature. Scientific facts are *never* accurate pictures or derivatives of an extra-discursive reality, but always discursive constructions and as such subject to (local) social practices. Frankly, I feel inclined to exclaim: what is so scandalous up to here? Any conception of

science that omits these insights and refers to "outside evidence" (RATNER, para.5), in the sense of a neutral criterion, has been heavily criticized by many scholars. It is a large step from these post-empiricist statements to the extreme position RATNER wants to critique here, a position according to which "beliefs are simply opinions" (para.6), undistinguishable in terms of plausibility, legitimacy or adequacy. [2]

In addition, the examples used by RATNER to demonstrate just how "real" are the technical applications of objective scientific knowledge ("send people to the moon," "cure disease," "generate electric power," para.9) are not convincing for his argument, as they point to other kinds of factual constructions than those in question. Rockets fly, chemical drugs destroy human cells and electrons move—here we are talking about *physical entities* and their *causal* interrelations, which is not the same as talking about *social/mental* entities and the relations between them. Why does not RATNER choose the "scientific" explanation of the non-existence of god, human deviance, gender differences, and pathologies in cognitive development or emotional states as examples for stable and imperturbable truths instead? Those cases would make more evident that what we refer to as scientifically valid explanatory concepts (be it attachment theory, gender identity, resilience, basic emotions, stages of cognitive development) are part of and gain their discursive power through scholarly paradigms. As such they are never free from being results of local agreements and "interpretive conventions" (para.5). And it is nothing new that we even may turn the argument around at this point, as the "factual" and "scientific" findings of the natural sciences like physics are influenced by the very experiments in which they were confirmed (HEISENBERG, 1973) and that "factual" findings of the natural sciences are always also manufactured socially by scientists working together in the laboratory (KNORR-CETINA, 1984). [3]

The other illustrations RATNER constructed, when pointing to the difference between the *mythical* construction of the "virgin birth of Mary" and the *objective* construction of "the concept of a gene" (para.21), are not very telling either, they are rather examples of what philosophers call "begging the question," as their meaning is owed to what they are utilized to demonstrate; here, the difference between "scientific truth" and "religious belief." [4]

2. A Critical Realist Position and the Question of "Cultural Convenience"

In order to avoid the accusation of naïve realism, RATNER refers to himself as a *critical realist* (para.9). As far as his arguments against constructionism are concerned, however, I suspect that the minimum criteria of a critical realist approach are not always met. In too many cases there is no effective restriction on the validity of *objectivity* and *scientifically achieved knowledge*. Neither is there much attention given to the *relationship between power and scientific or scholarly discourse*. There is no serious attempt to make sure that despite the assumption that the existence of an "extra-discursive" world will influence our knowledge, all knowledge about this world still needs to be questioned and that we always need

to attend to the various ways in which the production of knowledge is intertwined with social rules and regulations, determining who may speak in the name of science and who may not (see e.g. PARKER, 1998, 1999; WILLIG, 1999). While RATNER praises science for having "democratized knowledge by making it empirically based" (para.19), I do not see him worry much about the hegemonic discourse of "science" or "objectivity" being influenced by power relations, or about the possibilities granted to him who accepts "general agreements about the real world" as a "common fund of knowledge" (para.11) and denied to whoever refuses to accept these premises. [5]

There are numerous descriptions of the epistemological position of critical realism in relation to that of social constructionism (see the contributions in PARKER, 1998; NIGHTINGALE & CROMBY, 1999). Critical realism, as I understand it from those psychological contributions, does not deny constructionist achievements, but questions them after taking them into account. For critical realists it is important to point out (in opposition to constructionism) that discourse is not independent from material structures—but it is just as important to be aware (against naive realism or empiricism) that all knowledge is to be thrown into question. Referring to RATNER's examples, this would mean that also seemingly natural conditions of the human race (be they at the level of "genes" [para.21], be it our "desire to live healthy lives" [para.20] or the reality of psychiatric diseases [para.28]) are understood as historically and culturally contingent constructions. [6]

One difference between a critical realist and a constructionist position lies in some critical realists' credo that there are relatively distinct criteria about how to critically access and in what direction to change those constructions. In some versions, especially when a critical realist (philosophical) position is combined with a version of Foucauldian discourse analysis, all constructions seem to be assessed through the lens of power imbalance and social injustice. Despite my respect for a differentiated critical realist position, from the way many critical realists in psychology move to the selection of *some* entities that are beyond construction (materiality, economics, power relations, the body), I suspect that this version of critical realism is all too prone to the ideological construction of *what lies* beyond appearance (WILLIG, 1999) or even to the re-introduction of the cognitivists' way of referring to "the body" as object of knowledge (when equating "embodied" aspects of subjectivity with "physiological" brain processes) (e.g. CROMBY, 2004). [7]

In whatever fashion the difference between constructionist and critical realist attitudes may be described, it should be mentioned that the writings of critical realists in psychology provide alternative readings of the very psychological phenomena (like mental illness or intelligence) RATNER refers to as examples for the unquestionable "Allgemeingültigkeit" (para.27, para.28) of scientific results. And, speaking from a cultural psychological view point, many indigenous psychologies have furnished series of examples for the modernist and Western hegemony contained in psychology's "objective" findings, and in the concept of "objectivity" itself, including the sharp distinction between the subject and the object of knowledge. As I do not find such critical reflection in RATNER's

argument, I suggest that the "critical" in his version of realism is writ small and in some formulations his appraisal of scientific knowledge comes closer to POPPER's (1974) *critical rationalism*, which is empiricist at the core and vastly different from the more reflexive versions of *critical realist* positions in *critical or cultural psychology* (PARKER, 1998; NIGHTINGALE & CROMBY, 1999; WILLIG, 1999; ZIELKE, 2006b, 2006c). [8]

The crucial and relevant question is how we can describe the way non-discursive aspects of the world and of the self limit or shape discursive construction *without* falling back to empiricist and power neutral categories. This is the point at which what GERGEN calls "cultural convenience" comes in as a criterion for what is counted as real and right. [9]

3. The More Severe Problems: Dialogue, Participation, Agency

How does the constructionist concept of epistemic relativism ("local truths") relate to the priority of dialogue and social pragmatics? In many recent constructionist proposals (GERGEN, 2001b; SHOTTER, 2003), great emphasis is placed on the dialogue quality of human existence. Here RATNER perceives a discrepancy between the appreciation of difference and the praise of dialogue. As noted in my first reply to RATNER, I do see a weakness in constructionist epistemology and theory here and I want to be more detailed about it now:

- a. Dialogue without any, not even procedural, criteria for the recognition of the other's perspective falls short of arguments against the assumption and appreciation of incommensurability—which in fact would render "dialogue" impossible or reduce it to a meaningless cacophony (for a more detailed approach to this problem see STRAUB, ZIELKE & WERBIK, 2005)
- b. The appraisal of "dialogue and difference" could indicate a moral standard of constructionism that would be in conflict with relativist constructionist meta-theory. I will discuss this further later in this paper. [10]

Nevertheless, RATNER's way of reasoning still misses the point: He declares the assumption of objective "truth" as a necessary precondition for the motivation to convince a dialogue partner, and the assumption of the chance to convince him or her as a necessary precondition for engaging in dialogue at all. In doing so, he installs a false binary, the choice between the modernist consensus-oriented form of dialogue—or no dialogue at all. In fact, his "undercomplex" (LUHMANN, 1993) argumentation makes it easy for constructionism to evade the difficult question of *how to conceptualize* dialogue on the premise of unlimited difference and without any obligation to the recognition of the other's perspective. [11]

It can be argued here, from the constructionist perspective, that there are different criteria for what counts as the aim of dialogical communication. Mikhail BAKHTIN's (1984) theory of dialogue, which is an important reference for many constructionist definitions, places the dialogical construction of meaning at the fundamental level of every utterance. Language and linguistic meaning are

dialogical *per se* and every sentence or utterance is in the first place coined by the deep conflict between competitive voices. Difference, in this fundamental sense, is not to be overcome by consensus—it is to be appreciated as such. Of course—the rationalist and teleological speaker RATNER quite self-evidently presupposes will not be able to function in such dialogue, his logical theory of mind and rationalist evaluation of action would suggest leaving the scene and refusing dialogue. But, however, that new epistemologies for psychology also support new models of personal identity: the proposals submitted by GERGEN (1991), even more so the one submitted by HERMANS and KEMPEN (1993) are good examples for a constructionist, dialogue-bound theory of the person. [12]

According to BAKHTINIAN theory, it is not really a "choice" to step into this kind of dialogical relationship with others, as it is characteristic of the structure of human selves, even for human existence, to *be* in dialogue: "to be means to communicate dialogically" (BAKHTIN, 1984, p.287). This kind of dialogue escapes RATNER's critique *and* avoids the risk of prescribing the most powerful position as "consensus"; it avoids what GERGEN might refer to as "tyranny" of hegemonic discourse (GERGEN, 2001a, see RATNER, para.2). [13]

It must be mentioned, however, against some too euphemistic aspects of a "dialogical" or "relational self" and despite the strengths of BAKHTINIAN literary and philosophical theory of meaning, that dialogue between persons who affect each other in a living way is different from and cannot be fully explained via BAKHTIN's concept of dialogicity and its postmodernist interpretations. There is some evidence that human dialogue partners feel the need to at least presume a common reality and the possibility to convince the other through good argumentation (which is not the same as presenting "imperturbable" truths). It must be considered, too, that in everyday life there may be conflict between dialogical voices which leads to one or both sides' refusal to let the other exist and that the social sciences need to provide an explanation for this that exceeds the euphemistic picture of the unproblematic "juxtaposition" (BAKHTIN, 1984; HERMANS & KEMPEN, 1993) of contradictory positions. [14]

After making this distinction, the crucial questions remain: *How can* (intersubjective) dialogue function when separated from the normative aim of bridging decisive differences between participants' positions? And *why should* such *dialogue* be an option (or in terms of meta-theory: "culturally convenient") at all, if not with the aim to achieve some kind of shared understanding? Here, I think, the constructionist notion of cultural dialogue or social practice needs to be reworked. It needs:

- a. procedural criteria for what is to be understood as dialogue or "joint action" (SHOTTER, 2003), e.g. a pragmatist version of discourse ethics, which among other things draws on the difference between persuading and convincing a dialogue partner (see HABERMAS, 1983);
- b. a post-cognitivist concept of the participant which attributes agency and includes the possibility for the individual to take a critical view of what has

been discursively manufactured as consent (BURR, 1999; see also ZIELKE, 2006a, 2006c);

- c. a relational and in this sense relativist view of psychological (scientific or every day) constructs, based on the insight that there is no neutral tertium comparationis against which differing perspectives can be evaluated (quite the opposite to what RATNER fancies by "science" providing "a common fund of evidence" [para.11]). [15]

Many versions of constructionism have problems at least with a) and b): Despite placing much significance with the dialogical, symbolic practice of "meaning-making," the way individuals participate in this process, their embodied being-in-the-world and their stake in the pragmatic construction are treated as secondary, sometimes as mere "by-products" or "effects" of a trans-subjective, anonymous discourse which at times seems to be going on above, not between the dialoguing subjects (ZIELKE 2004, 2006a, 2006b; STRAUB et al., 2005). The risk to (unwillingly?) strive for a psychology without subject and a notion of cultural dialogue or social practice that goes without a concept of the participant's agency in my view is higher than that of losing pace with the "truth game." [16]

Furthermore, in some formulations, the constructionist ideal of bringing *different* perspectives into *dialogue* without any warrant for the need of agreement seems to indicate an unreflected *normative standard* in constructionism presupposing the willingness to be moved and to learn, to share and be solidly behind one another—a euphemistic, moral standard (maybe similar to the assumption of solidarity in the neo-pragmatist writings of Richard RORTY [1989]) which is not in accordance with the epistemic and moral relativist basis of constructionist meta-theory (see ZIELKE, 2004). [17]

4. Pragmatic Constructionism and the Place of the Participant

This is not the place to provide a distinct analysis of a constructionist alternative. In broad perspective, however, the reformulation of the constructionist vision I fancy could profit from some aspects of philosophical pragmatism, and it could draw on the following: [18]

Philosophical pragmatism, from PEIRCE to PUTNAM, allows for a *theory of knowledge* that strives to take both critiques equally seriously: that of metaphysical realism and that of a skeptical attitude, denying any criteria that enable one to differentiate between adequate and impossible construction. For example, as PUTNAM's neo-pragmatist version argues (with a permanent gaze on WITTGENSTEIN), while investigating manifold interpretations and language games, philosophy can relate the certainty of everyday orientation in-the-world, namely the certainty of the *ordinariness* of our everyday experience, to the necessary *presupposition* of a common world, descriptive validity and truth. In a similar manner, WITTGENSTEIN reminds us that although "meaning" may be "use," there is something like "pragmatically founded certainty" (WITTGENSTEIN, 1953; PUTNAM, 1990). [19]

A pragmatist *version of cultural/social practice* would also support a *notion of dialogue* where different positions are not "unified" by explicit consensus, but implicit consensus is installed through collective practice or language use within (and sometimes across) different life-forms (WITTGENSTEIN, 1953). [20]

And at last, some pragmatist thinkers have stressed that the specific form of practical *cultural knowledge* people make use of to participate in a cultural language game or in any life-form is very much in contrast to the concept of objective, observer-independent knowledge as it requires a first person-perspective. This should be kept in mind when searching for a constructionism-compatible, non-cognitivist concept of the participant's (socially mediated) *agency*. With reference to BOURDIEU's concept of Habitus—as one example—we could argue that discourse and social practice can be conceptualized with some form of intentional and critical judgment attributed to the *embodied participants* (RENN, 2004), but that this does not automatically mean re-introducing a new version of the autonomously deciding, self-sufficient and rationalist subject of knowledge. [21]

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