

The Relativism of Social Constructionism

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### **Abstract**

We found ourselves intrigued by Gergen's replies to our special issue partners. Indeed, we found a not so subtle theme among them—the theme of relativism. We begin with Gergen's (2011) assertion that his relational “way of understanding our world” is “enormously valuable to the human condition.” We then puzzle over what this assertion might mean, given that he specifically denies that relational being can be claimed to be true or real. After disputing a practical utility or even a preferential basis for this assertion, we discuss his problematic appeal to the relativism of social constructionism.

### The Relativism of Social Constructionism

At this juncture in the dialogue, we are hopeful that some readers have read enough of the exchange to begin to see what is at stake in Gergen's social constructionist ideas and assumptions. Accordingly, we will not waste space here setting the context for this, our second reply, nor do we desire to spend all the reader's precious time defending our original remarks against Gergen's (2011) thoughtful counter-arguments. Instead, we find ourselves intrigued by Gergen's replies to our symposium partners. Indeed, we find a not so subtle theme among them that titles our response—the theme of relativism.

#### **Relativistic “Evaluation”**

In his response to Scott Churchill (2011), for example, we were fascinated by Gergen's (2011) assertion that his relational “way of understanding our world” is “enormously valuable to the human condition” (p. ?). We wondered what this evaluation could mean to a social constructionist. Why is this particular understanding any more valuable than any other? What criteria would a social constructionist use to make this judgment of value? Gergen cannot claim that the understanding he promotes through his book is any more real or truthful. As he says in his reply to Sugarman and Martin (2011), “the constructionist neither denies nor asserts anything as true or real” (Gergen, 2011, p. ?). Why then would he consider his “way of understanding” “enormously valuable?” We examined the possibility of a pragmatic answer to this question in our previous reply. As we noted there, the practical utility or usefulness of an understanding requires nonarbitrary criteria for what usefulness means, something that the social constructionist cannot provide.

In his reply, Gergen (2011) seems to refer to his own personal preferences for relational being, as if merely choosing it and making a case for others to choose it justifies it as

“enormously valuable to the human condition” (p. ?) This tack is notable among some existentialists: values or visions are valuable, rich, or valid for us merely because we *choose* them. One problem with this tack is that sadists and racists could easily claim that their values have superiority merely because they prefer or choose them. Again, what could “enormously valuable” mean if everyone has their own preferences and choices?

Here, Gergen would surely steer us away from an existential individualism where preferences and choices are relative to the individual who prefers and chooses them. He would clearly call attention to the co-active nature of these preferences and choices, holding that they are relative to the communities we create through this co-activity. However, these preferences and choices are still thoroughly relativistic because they stem solely from this interpersonal activity, which is “created” (p. 188) and “invented” (p. 203) without regard to anything else (Gergen, 2009). The “relative to” merely moves from the individual to the community. For this reason, these co-active meanings could be flights of fancy or paranoid delusions, with no way to discriminate the more valuable.

Why, then, does Gergen take this relativistic tack? Most scholars try to avoid relativism because it implies an “anything goes” approach to the world, and thus a kind of nihilism about what is justifiable and what matters. Relativism not only hinders people taking seriously evaluative statements like “enormously valuable,” but it also flies in the face of Gergen writing his book, clearly itself a type of justification for what he thinks matters. Our best guess is that Gergen advocates relativism because he views it as the only alternative to dogmatism. That is, there is either tolerance or intolerance, and he believes the former logically necessitates his relativistic stance. Also entailed in this stance is the assumption that people will do good things with their freedom from dogmatism. Unfortunately, we believe it is naïve to assume that people

will all naturally or spontaneously do good when liberated; many people are not as good as Gergen. We believe that all of us need to strive for character, defined nonarbitrarily (Richardson, in press; Slife, in press).

Is not Gergen's scenario, pragmatism or existentialism, also a familiar version of the modern age's utopian faith in unfettered freedom? Several observers have described how this form of freedom can decline into emptiness, shallowness, and narcissism unless it is buttressed by genuine character ideals that are held with an awareness of their context-dependency and humility. Humility and openness to the possible insights of others, even very different others, seem to us to be much more demanding than Gergen's relativism and much better cures for dogmatism than his faith in unfettered freedom.

### ***Intersubjective Relativism***

We also agree with Clegg (2011) that there is more than a bit of Enlightenment legacy in some aspects of Gergen's work. Part of this legacy, from our perspective, involves our claim (from our first reply; Slife & Richardson, 2011) that Gergen has clearly moved the formulation and understanding of meanings from individual subjectivity to the inter-subjectivity of co-actors. As we said in our first reply, we view this move as an advance on the classical dualism that separated individual subjectivity from other persons and the objective world. However, we have two related problems with intersubjectivity being the final move. First, as mentioned, it still implies that meanings are relativistic, only this time they are relative to their constructed societies rather than separate individuals. As we stated in our first reply, this relativism creates an absolute type of Enlightenment freedom that is ultimately a disorienting, meaningless freedom, because it is more a "freedom from" constraints and dogmatism than a "freedom to" doing something important or good.

The second problem with Gergen's dualistic Enlightenment legacy is that his notion of co-active intersubjectivity omits major portions of the world. We discussed three portions of that world in our first reply, the natural, ethical, and temporal facets of the world. In other words, we view Gergen's intersubjectivity as a one-sided dualism rather than a nondualism, or even a monism or pluralism, with the classically "objective" world abandoned. From our perspective, this leaves Gergen's rendition of meanings not only essentially groundless but also ultimately meaningless. It simply does not take seriously important aspects of the world in which we live.

Interestingly, Gergen (2011) seems amenable in his reply to considering some aspects of the world as "collaborative" (p. ?). Specifically, he says that "it would be useful and desirable to extend this account of relational being to what we commonly construct as the physical environment. Most inviting would be an extension of the concept of co-action to include nature and earth" (p. ?). Gergen models openness and humility in examining this possibility. We wonder, however, if this move to embrace other aspects of the human context would create problems for his general social constructionist project. First, would it expand the notion of social to inanimate matter, "nature and earth" (p. ?)? If so, how "social" or "constructionist" can inanimate matter be? How would we conceptualize a truly co-acting or collaborative boulder? Second, does this "extension" to nonhuman collaborators mean that social constructionism would welcome the notion of a God, Brahmin, or Buddhist Interbeing, however nonfinal and incomplete these notions might be?

### **Incompleteness without Relativism**

This absence of finality and completeness in our knowledge is something Gergen (2011) clarifies to some degree in part of his response to Joshua Clegg's (2011) piece. We agree with Gergen that this absence accentuates the need for openness and humility in all our dealings and

interactions. Still, this incompleteness and need for humility does not logically necessitate the relativism of Gergen. For example, we do not know with completeness or finality how the many foods we eat interact with our bodies, yet this lack of completeness and finality does not prevent us from having some knowledge of what a healthy diet might be. The incompleteness of knowledge does not mean that everything is up for grabs, or more pertinently, up for whatever co-actors prefer or choose to make of it. As we stated in our first reply, there are all sorts of contingencies and contexts—natural, ethical, and temporal—that provide limiting parameters, if not enabling conditions, that are not merely “up for grabs,” as we view Gergen’s position. Indeed, it is because of the potential changeableness of contingencies and contexts that humility and openness are so important.

We are similarly intrigued by Gergen’s (2011) protestations (against Churchill) that he is not “doing ontology” (p. ?). This seems like a highly problematic claim to us. First, it seems clear that Gergen makes ontological claims about our being relational beings, along with implicit moral claims about how freedom and creativity are good things, especially when unfettered by dogmatism. Why not admit that such ontological and moral claims are part of being human, inescapably engaged, as we are, in the human struggle? Those claims give us life, substance, and meaningfulness.

The challenge is adjudicating these claims and deepening their meaningfulness without aggressively asserting or imposing them. This challenge, we believe, is best met by deepening and transforming our ethical or spiritual outlooks, not by casting them as all essentially baseless or equal. Parents face these issues all the time. They do not want to impose themselves on their children, but they must also set limits on and confront their children with various issues. They attempt to minimize irrational guilt and shame, but they do not halt the limit setting and

confrontation. Gergen's fears about the possibility of anybody imposing anything on anyone means that relativism is his only resort. He seems to be striving for a philosophical or spiritual outlook that will transform violence and hate into something more humble and deeply generous. The problem is, we believe, one cannot overcome human finitude and the often tragic struggle for wisdom and peace with the philosophical maneuver of relativism.

### **Relativistic Mountains**

Gergen picked up our mountain metaphor in an instructive way. In our first reply, we agreed with him that human constructors clearly participate in the meanings of mountains, or any part of our context (e.g., good, bad, beautiful, ugly). Yet we also asked whether there was something about the mountain that is *other than* the human constructors that participates in the practical meanings about it. We do not want to argue for an objective world that is separate from our subjectivity, as a dualist might understand mountains, but we do believe that some acknowledgement of parameters and conditions other than the co-actors is pivotal to any practical and credible meanings about the world.

In his response to us, Gergen (2011) reminds us that human constructors can operate as if the mountains do not exist, e.g., "most maps of the world...reveal no mountains..." (p. ?). This is surely an important point, but it is only pertinent when the otherness of mountains is not relevant to the practical human task at hand. To live in the Rocky Mountains, as the first author (Slife) does, is to have one's constructions of mountains continuously ruptured by the otherness of the mountains themselves. The impedance of progress that one feels, as one trudges up a 12,000 foot mountain, is not an optional construction. One can "construct" the impedance—e.g., "good for me" or "exhausting"—but one cannot construct it away. Moreover, to say that mountains can be selectively ignored misses the point, the point being that many other factors

than co-actors need to be taken into account in making sense of meaning-making. For this reason, we salute Gergen's expressed wish to include more of the nonhuman as potential "collaborators" in the construction of meanings.

### **Conclusion**

At this point, we should remind the reader of our generally positive review of Gergen's book in our first reply, not to mention our written review elsewhere (Slife & Richardson, 2010). However, we would argue that his more relational elements, which we view as a genuine contribution, can and should be separated from his social constructionist premises, which we see as deeply problematic. The latter, we believe, have four deleterious aspects related to their relativism (our four sub-headings above). First, we wonder about the meaningfulness of evaluations, such as "enormously valuable," when they cannot be real or true, even as tentative claims, but are instead merely preferred or chosen. Second, we question Gergen's exclusion of every other factor than the interpersonal, and thus his extreme emphasis on the inter-subjective in constructing meanings. Third, we endorse his accentuation of the absence of completeness and finality in human knowledge; we just question whether this absence necessitates his form of relativism. Finally, we acknowledge his point about a human's selective attention to some facets of our context, including mountains. We would argue, however, that *relevant* facets of our context, including inescapable ethical commitments (Slife & Richardson, 2008; Taylor, 1989), need to be taken into account when formulating credible and practical "constructions," making them, ultimately, *not* relativistic, at least in the social constructionist's sense.

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