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## “OVER-SATURATED” CONSTRUCTIONIST KENNETH GERGEN AND HIS OFFER TENDERED TO (CULTURAL) PSYCHOLOGISTS<sup>1</sup>

“Who are you? A stranger asked.  
– A pouring-out world of temporary opportunities.”<sup>2</sup>

### ABSTRACT

The text is focused on a non-precisely known, or at least not widespread and fully accepted among psychologists, theory of a very well known (and controversial) researcher, Kenneth Gergen. It deals with his dialogue with mainstream psychology, his version of social constructionism offered to cultural psychologists and his attitude toward language, narrative and last but not least – research method of psychology.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Kenneth Gergen is a Professor and the Head of the Psychology Department at Swarthmore College. His scientific output includes an impressive number of 437 articles and 33 books (Gergen, 2009a). He is an appreciated figure in the world of science, as evidenced by the numerous awards and distinctions he has received around the world: *honoris causa* doctorate of the University of Athens, Theodore Sarbin Award for the American Psychological Association, Alexander von Humboldt Prize in the Humanities, *honoris causa* doctorate of the Tilburg University in the Netherlands (Gergen, 2009a). Despite the recognition all over the world, he is still associated more with an exotic phenomenon than with a serious, important psychological concept in Polish psychology. So far, none of his larger works has been translated to Polish, and it was not until 2009 that the first Polish edition of his famous book titled *The Saturated Self* (*Nasycone Ja*) was planned.

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<sup>2</sup> Text based on Kenneth J. Gergen's statement in *The Saturated Self*, 1991.

Kenneth Gergen is a populariser and advocate of important and controversial thought in social and cultural psychology. To present his theoretical deliberations, we have to trace the dialogue that was established between the representatives of psychology as modern science, which has its roots in the famous Wundt's laboratory at Leipzig (1879),<sup>3</sup> and the scholars who started to question such modernist concepts as objectivity, truth or rationality. These are concepts that define the hard science since psychology, from the very beginning of its existence, like physics or chemistry, has had (with varying degrees of success) ambition to represent itself in such a way.

Gergen deals with, as he calls it, social constructionism. This is a very important remark, because many people, often too hastily, consider him as a constructivist. He presents himself as a scientist drawing on some of the assumptions of constructivism, but he points out his contrary view (Gergen, 1994). He emphasizes the ontological status of the world and mind, as well as the Western individualism rooted in it, against which his social constructionism stands in opposition (Gergen, 2001).

### 1. KENNETH GERGEN'S SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

Gergen's constructionism presupposes that no person or social group can claim to have superior knowledge of what something "is". This is because there is no configuration of words or phrases that fits particularly well with what we call the world both *here* and *out there*. To quote Gergen: "We may wish to agree that 'something exists,' but whatever 'is' makes no demands on the configuration of phonemes used by people to communicate it" (Gergen & Gergen, 1997, p. 32). This implies that no science, religion, philosophy, political party or any other group is superior to the other. Importantly, by not falling into his own trap, Gergen points out that the constructionists do not try to prove that their rationales are final (Gergen, 2001). The assumptions of social constructionism are of a metatheoretical nature, which is to establish a dialogue and build a spectrum of research opportunities.

An illustration of the above-mentioned statement about the negative impact of hegemony and the superiority of one view over another, are examples of countries such as New Zealand and India (Gergen, Lock, Gulerce, & Misra, 1996). The history of these countries shows how, by imposing a different perspective on someone and creating conditions that prevent the realization of traditional assumptions and practices, people can be isolated from their culture. Both in India and New Zealand, the colonizers, having political and economic advantages, began to adapt the existing reality to their

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<sup>3</sup> Most mainstream psychologists forget that Wundt himself, the father of modern psychology, in his mature creative period (1900–1920), wrote a 10-volume *Voelkerpsychologie*, in which he clearly sees the future of psychology in historical (method) and cultural research (the object of interest – higher mental processes expressed through the products of culture), rather than experimental one, and the fact that therefore his, as well as the present (and future?) psychology, has at least bipartite nature! In addition to the above-mentioned, dominant perspective, in psychology, an alternative or, as some people want, complimentary vision (i.a. cultural psychoanalysis, humanistic psychology) has been developed since its beginnings (L. Wygotski, R. Shweder, E. Boesch, M. Cole, C. Ratner, & "later" J. S. Bruner).

own needs. This situation can be compared to the flood that destroys everything it encounters. The implication of these ego- and ethnocentric behaviours was to cut the indigenous people off from their culture, customs and tradition. In psychology, it resulted in the rejection of one's own local worldview in favour of methodology, theories and practices of Western culture. A distance was created between the academic (scientific) world and the cultural heritage, which as a consequence led to “pseudo-understanding” of people from another culture. It is like depriving a young human from the West of their iPod, jeans and Coca-Cola and forcing them to meditate on top of the mountain in a winter morning. Obviously, these behaviours would be accompanied by an assumption about their healing or health-promoting nature. For such constructionists as Gergen, this is a signal indicating the need to create knowledge that is well-established in a given culture and locally useful (Gergen et al., 1996), and to draw attention to the basic carrier of its meanings – language.

## 2. LANGUAGE AND NARRATIVE

Kenneth's Gergen's concept is based primarily on language theories developed mainly in the 1950s and the 1960s. First of all, he reminds us that by using language we construct our reality. This happens in the processes of cultural relations. We do not create our constructions to describe the world “as it is”. Language, as John Locke (1689) already thought, is not a carrier of truth nor rational thought. The construction is useful for us when communicating with other people, so pragmatism can already be emphasized here as the main function of language (Gergen, 2001). Citing J. L. Austin (Gergen, 1994), Gergen calls this *the performative nature of language*, the understanding of which requires us to focus less attention on the linguistic act as such and more on the patterns of interaction in which these acts occur. Each community based on its own laws and conventions gives meanings to concepts and statements that fulfil a specific function in the processes of that community, hence: ... when we say that a given statement is ‘exact’ or ‘inaccurate,’ ‘true’ or ‘false,’ we do not judge it in accordance with some abstract or idealised standards of compliance... . Rather, we point to its level of accuracy or mismatch in particular circumstances. (Gergen, 1994, p. 86).

Going further, the concept can only serve as a description or picture of reality using only the local research procedures in which we have given it this function (Gergen, 1994). Knowledge is also determined by language because our ability to construct depends on our vocabulary, that is, a resource of our concepts. Gergen's concept agrees with Wittgenstein's assumption that the boundaries of our cognition are those of our language – strong linguistic determinism. We are not able to get to know something that goes beyond the meaning of concepts – arising from the cultural process – which we use (Wittgenstein, 1953). People from different cultural backgrounds construct reality, try to understand it, or communicate with one another in as many different ways as the number of languages in the world.

Being aware of cultural narrative patterns, Gergen highlights the socio-cultural sources of individual stories and although we can create an infinite number of these quantitative patterns, we are limited by the need to be understood and the need to recognise the sense of that story by other people from a particular cultural context. Gergen, referring to the famous Wittgenstein's “boundaries of my language mean the

boundaries of my world”, expresses his conviction that the boundaries of our narrative traditions also define the possible boundaries of our identities (cf. Gergen, 1998). Identity comes from the narrative and is conveyed (narrated) and received in language. Furthermore, the very life with narratives is necessary to have a sense of identity. Certain patterns and trends for certain types of personality and negation of others (e.g., a humanist, rational, inspired, a puritan, a rebel, etc.) are integrated into broader socio-cultural contexts, epochs, currents or counter systems, such as the French Revolution, Avant-garde, Be-In, Autumn of Nations, and many others. They are a determinant of our individual fascinations and outline the style and way to follow within the mother’s narrative. Referring directly to Gergen once again, it is worth noting at the end that the narratives live in *the realm of relations*, that is, they arise in contact with another person and in this contact they change and create ever new narrative patterns. We are talking here about *contact*, which is a necessary factor for the existence of relation and, according to Gergen, should be identified with it. Moreover, as Gergen (2009b) writes: “... the individual, as a result of the process of the emergence of the relational self, reaches the third (and last) stage, ... in which self is replaced by relationality, in other words, in which the transformation of ‘you’ and ‘I’ to ‘us.’”

Bringing up the subject of main assumptions, it is impossible to forget that social constructionists are not interested in an entity itself. It is not longer an entity whose role in the Western tradition, as the main object of research, is firmly rooted in scientific thought. Gergen (1994) shifts our attention from individuality to the aforementioned relations that take place among people from specific communities (understood as a culture or even a subculture), as well as to the relation that takes place between culture–individual–culture. It is by investigating relations that we can learn how people give meanings and, consequently, how they construct reality. According to constructionists, “one cannot consider the issues of man as an individual or an element without cultural context, and the subject is a relational subject and always an element of a broader system” (Gergen, 1994, p. 81).

### 3. DIALOGUE WITH MAINSTREAM PSYCHOLOGY

While mainstream psychology in an universalist, or even absolutist, manner, assumes the existence of objective truth (e.g., morality, values manifested in behaviours which supercultural laws attempt to formulate) and seeks to clarify these concepts, Gergen argues that it is pointless to deal with them outside the categories of local cultures. He points out, however, that, “... constructionism itself cannot be considered to be universal truth; it is also an idea (like modernism) that emerges from social processes” (Gergen, 2001, p. 807). As one can see, constructionism is not interested in the objective truth as such. Only local truths are important, as they uphold traditions. Doing science is not about describing how nature “mirrors”, but it is about active participation in the life of particular cultures. In turn, imposing an “objective” truth on local communities is not only an expression of arrogance but also it creates a scope for conflict – “Declarations of truth beyond tradition are, ... a step towards tyranny and ... the end of communication” (Gergen & Gergen, 1997).

The very popular research by Ekman and his colleagues (Ekman, 1973; Ekman & Friesen, 1986) on the universality of facial expressions in various cultures is a clear

example of how cultural psychology was previously laconic – too laconic, according to Gergen, to question the universal metatheory and undermine the empirical tradition of investigating. Such psychology uncritically allowed the possibility of better recognition of a given culture by a scientist, who honours the Western traditions, than indigenous inhabitants themselves. The nonsense is the desire to learn about cultural diversity using only the methodology of 19th-century psychology. Studying of any culture within empirical traditions limits, translates and transforms reality into its terminology. The picture of this culture is distorted – determined by the methods used by the researcher – because “when universal psychological mechanisms and processes are rejected while drawing on universal metatheory, cultural psychology still remains the child of Western modernism” (Gergen & Gergen, 1997, p. 32). Too little attention, according to Gergen, is paid to these methods and concepts and how they interfere with the image of the investigated community. This method delineates the choice of procedures, as well as a perspective and ontology in psychology, determining and thus limiting the cognitive abilities of researchers (*garbage in – garbage out*) – we only see what we want to/can see.

The elements of constructionist stance, close to Gergen, will be presented now. This stance can be presented with the motto: *Think globally, act locally* (Gergen et al., 1996). It involves the transformation of existing Western psychological thought, taking into account the specific needs of a given socio-cultural context. This is an opportunity to modernise without abolishing a local culture. It is not difficult to note that the so-called American (Western) psychology is based on the reverse colonialist principle – think locally, act globally, which is cut-throat for microcultures, microtrends and local truths. Even *oriental studies* reflect an assumption about Western power (Gergen et al., 1996, p. 497). Gergen points out that culture transforms even in its own context, so even the most sensitive influence of a cultural psychologist makes minimal changes in it, which, based on the butterfly or domino effect, may cause ulterior, significant and unpredictable changes (Giilerce, 1995).

Gergen, above all, accuses the traditional psychology followers of insisting on placing psychology next to the natural sciences, taking over their terminology and relying on experimental methods, not accepting that this is the only one of many possible approaches. Unlike other scientific disciplines, including such humanities as anthropology, sociology or economics, psychology prefers former scientism directed towards “objective” knowledge. As a result, her cognitive “poverty” entails a process of intellectual stagnation and isolation from related scientific disciplines, and adopted methodolatry (a cult of the method) excludes many key human problems from its area of interest. Gergen tries to explain it by the fact that psychology after the “divorce” with philosophy is still experiencing a crisis of scientific “identity” and conceptual confusion accepting random ontologies or, what is worse, not realizing that we always “talk/analyse with some ontology”! The assumptions of natural science guarantee its prestige, as a relatively new science, at the expense of poverty of acquired knowledge (Gergen, 1996b).

The main postulates that distinguish Gergen’s cultural psychology include:

1) The influence of culture, including a repeated emphasis on technological progress in Gergen’s texts, on the life of the researcher and his research perspective – “New technologies arrive in elegant wrappings of promise. The new software promises greater processing speed, the latest television a sharper picture, the new car less engine noise, and so on. We are drawn to the pleasures of such promises” (Gergen, 2002, p. 103). The

problem of determining the object of research at a time of intense social change and blurring of cultural boundaries should be mentioned here. We live in a time of constant, aggressive technological development, which began four decades ago. The development of mass transport, media, communication possibilities (including the Internet) slowly, but significantly, has an impact on personal and cultural life (Gergen, 2002). The number, range and diversity of our relationships have expanded rapidly to such an extent that we are practically constantly flooded with opportunities and information from all over the world. The technologies available to us significantly affect the way we relate to other people or to our interaction with them. The intensity of human migration is increasing, and the speed of changing circumstances affects all traditions. There is an “invasion” of cultural enclaves. Information, products, entertainment and people (including psychologists and anthropologists) permeate from one culture to another and change its local landscape (Gergen, 2002). There is no doubt that we are dealing with the phenomenon of the blurring of boundaries between cultures, which is a real threat to each of them (Giilerce, 1995). The problem that this creates for the cultural psychologist is a growing difficulty in distinguishing the subject of research.

2) The micro-social and micro-cultural process as an object of interest for social constructionists – “Psychology should be practised within its cultural context” (Gergen et al., 1996).

3) *Self* as a “permeable being ‘permeated’ with culture is the basic subject of interest – ‘Who am I?’ The world is full of temporary possibilities” (Gergen, 1991, p. 139) and as a personal narrative (including the loss of credibility of the *self* due to the ongoing changes and polyphonic *self*).

4) The narrative methodology – “Constructive dialogue and the broader context of postmodern debates caused an explosion of methodological innovations” (Gergen, 1997) – Gergen’s favourite methods are: autobiography, polyvocality, collaborative research; participatory action research.

#### 4. SELF

Let us think about the aforementioned individualism. By interacting with other people, an individual in George Herbert Meada’s theory creates a sense of own *self* and sustains it through the opinion of others (see Giilerce, 1995). However, due to the development of technology, the role of other people in human life is increasingly growing. Gergen (2009b) mentions two aspects of this specific situation. The first is *preserving the past*. It is based on the fact that neither time nor distance is a threat to interpersonal relationships. After all, one can always call a friend from high school even if (s)he is thousands of miles away. In this way, the past is preserved, the circle of people important for us is constantly growing, and “old friendships die hard”. The second aspect is the *acceleration of the future*. The pace of establishing and strengthening relations has significantly increased, for example, two people in love, living in distant places, a hundred years ago they were left to write occasional letters to each other; they could also see each other sporadically, due to the long travelling time, for example, by train. Now the situation is completely different – two lovers can not only hear each other every day (via phone) but they can also see each other and thus make face-to-face conversations, being thousands of kilometres away (Internet, video calls). The possibility of constant contact enables others to be present in our lives at

any time, which in turn intensifies our relationships.

An individual establishes a living, virtual or imaginary relationships with other people. Each situation requires the adoption of an appropriate, often different, face. Different ways of seeing oneself, sometimes fleeting and incidental, are created. This is how we create our polyphonic self. However, in this way, the *self* loses its credibility as a basic element of identity and becomes an illusion. According to him, the *self* is limited and at the same time "saturated" with culture. He defines *self* as a limited, but permeable, being "saturated" with culture, close to the old concepts of soul (Gergen, 1991). When talking about micro-social processes, he means how an individual (that is their *self*) in relation to themselves and through interactions with other people, permeates with culture, falls under the sociotechnical influence, takes certain attitudes from it and then reconstructs it. Further, Gergen believes that *self* as an independent and multidimensional entity is problematic and seems to perceive the *self* as a place where many relations or interactions intersect.

Gergen presents the thesis that the social change which took place in 1970s–1990s (it should be added that this concerns the society of the United States, where those changes took place, inaccessible for example, to countries from behind the Iron Curtain, including Poles) caused the human to dive into the social reality – the values, views and lifestyle of other people. The everydayness and intensification of communication favour the process of blurring the individual *self*. The greater the connection with the social environment, the greater its reflection by an individual – this is the so-called *populating the self* which "not only opens relations to a new range of possibilities but, at the same time, the subjective life also becomes more layered" (Gergen, 1991, p. 71). Another consequence of this process is multiphrenia – simultaneous sinking into multiple and conflicting directions (Gergen, 1991). This is nothing more than an "overflowing world of temporary opportunities" (Gergen, 1991), which the postmodernist human being had to face. Finally, it is easier to understand how Gergen defines the concept of culture, which is a complex process that takes place between its various elements (relations), as a result of which a specific reality is constructed based on local language conventions.

## 5. METHOD

To understand Gergen's position more fully, the broader context concerning the formation of his scientific identity, which he gave vent to in 1973 in the article, or should we say the manifesto, *Social Psychology as History* (*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 1973, vol. 26, pp. 309–320), should be outlined. The imperfections of popular quantitative research methods in the social sciences, which could not be overlooked, pushed the scientists to search. In addition to Gergen, Strauss and Glaser, among others, presented their propositions. They were American sociologists, creators of the Grounded Theory. They proposed to "discover" the theory in data systematically obtained from social research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, p. 2). By investigating a particular community (with the help of interviews, an analysis of local texts) and gathering information about it, it is possible to spot an emerging, theory that is rooted, "grounded", within it. As it will turn out later in the article, Gergen presented similar solutions in psychology.

One of the most common methods used by Gergen is the narrative one. It enables

the subjects to speak for themselves – to tell their own story. This story is mainly based on several elements. Above all, the narrative may suggest a metaphor describing the specificity of a given story. A person saying that they are sociable, outgoing, enjoy life and love fun can suggest a metaphor for their life as a *never-ending party*. Another person saying that they are aggressive, ambitious, love competition and work hard suggests *rat race* as a metaphor for their life. Creating a metaphor is the basic process in constructing meaning. The structure of the narrative based mainly on the evaluation of the past, present and future meaning of *self* and the function it performs (i.e., ensuring the coherence of its meaning over time) should be noted.

As far as specific examples of narrative methods are concerned, a form of autobiography is frequently adopted, although some psychologists also weave the voices of other people, for example, those participating in classes for support groups, which allows an even more diverse theoretical picture. Such a method was applied by, among others, Mary Gergen, Kenneth's wife, in her work concerning gender and popular autobiography, weaving the researchers' statements into the narrative of women and men. According to Gergen, against the background of intercultural research, narrative methods could replace statistical comparisons of the investigated trends with a more varied and richer description of human relations in a given culture, revealing the differences in the community perceived usually as homogeneous (Gergen & Gergen, 1997).

Patti Lather and Chris Smithies in their work *Troubling with Angels* (as cited in Gergen & Gergen, 1997) showed a first-hand report concerning the private lives of women with AIDS and what they wanted to share with the world – their health state. These statements, together with excerpts concerning the experiences of researchers from the perspective of the members of the support group, were given to research participants for their comment before publication. This is an example of another qualitative method – *polyvocality* some works integrate polyvocality with narrative psychology. In her research on maltreatment of children, Karen Fox included, in addition to the accounts of victims and her experiences from therapy sessions, the views of the victims themselves – a voice that is practically absent in this type of research. The published text is arranged in three columns, representing three perspectives. This form forces the reader to think about each voice separately, but also in relation. Before printing, the whole was also given to the research participants for their comment (as cited in Gergen & Gergen, 1997).

Another interesting view on methodological issues, often cited by Gergen, is the so-called *collaborative research*, especially one of its variants, that is, *participatory action research*. The project carried out by Jim Scheurich together with Gerardo and Miquel Lopez can be given here as an example. The theme was the life of Mexican-American immigrants. They created a performance that was made up of music, sounds, text, images and social artefacts, based on the script involving the audience to participate. The creators made no assumptions about the nature of experience, so the performance was not strongly structured, which encouraged the audience to an open discussion of the whole event. The research enabled the audience to be deeply involved in shaping the event and simultaneously left them free to interpret it in many ways (as cited in Gergen & Gergen, 1997).



## 6. CONCLUSIONS

Kenneth's Gergen's social constructionism seems to be an interesting proposition, but it is certainly not free from some inaccuracies. The aim of our text was neither to glorify nor to criticise Gergen's proposition, but only to circulate it and to subject it to the polemics of the psychology community. However, presenting its assumptions, we cannot overlook its weaknesses, which raise doubts or favour healthy criticism.

The objections regarding Gergen's proposition often concern the discernible relativism, not to say "relativistic abuse". It does not fully explain whether it is possible to agree on a dispute between two different cultures since both have the right to equal "local true". This question is extremely important in an era of such phenomena as terrorism. Gergen does not fully explain this issue either, that is, according to what criteria individual cultures can be juxtaposed if there are no universal processes and mechanisms and it is not possible to describe them in terms of rules or laws. He is also frequently suspected of a lack of attachment to any moral system, as he allows many perspectives that are true and equal in principle.

Obviously, Gergen does not avoid criticism, on the contrary – he responds to it. The majority of it he explains using ontological assumptions different from those of the postmodern current, which are cherished by mainstream psychology (positivism, scientism, modernism). He also explains that, as a social constructionist, he avoids creating final assumptions because he is aware of the existing inconsistencies and will try to eliminate them through openness to dialogue and transformations (Gergen, 2001).

It should also be added that Kenneth Gergen's social constructionism, in its practical dimension, seems to shape the portrait, that is, the model, of a psychologist as a practitioner and researcher. The psychologist, according to him, should be characterized by openness and respect for otherness. They should develop their ability to change perspectives and to accept tolerance for otherness as an equal entity. However, the psychologist does not have to agree with the "other", it is enough that (s)he will recognise their value as an alternative. This would, in his opinion, result in the creation of "alternative human concepts that would contribute to the development of new methods, institutions and new policies. As a result, the theory would become a practical contribution to the construction of the future" (Gergen et al., 1996, p. 503).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Finally, we would like to share some thoughts regarding the conference that was held in Poznań in 2008, where we had the opportunity to meet K. Gergen. What impressed us most in his speech was certainly the way he worked with his students. The tasks he proposed to his students did not impose any certain structure and he seemed to leave them a lot of room for manoeuvre. Gergen gave the example of a student who could not cope with their assignment. The professor decided that he would allow the student to present their subject of the project in the form chosen by the student. It turned out that his student was a DJ and presented the project in the form of a musical collage. Not only Gergen liked this idea, but also the majority of students. This example perfectly illustrates the specificity of the approach presented – a bit of extravagance and, above all, sensitivity to other perspectives.

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