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### Constructivism in Psychology: Personal Construct Psychology, Radical Constructivism, and Social Constructionism

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#### **Introduction: Once Upon a Construction**

The constructivist psychologies theorize about and investigate how human beings create systems for meaningfully understanding their worlds and experiences. I refer to these “constructivisms” using the plural because there are many varieties of constructivism (Neimeyer & Raskin, 2001) and they have been described in various constellations (Botella, 1995; Chiari & Nuzzo, 1996a, 1996b; Lyddon, 1995; Mahoney, 1988, 1991, 1995; Rosen, 1996; Sexton, 1997). Depending upon how one chooses to carve out categories of constructivism, one finds differing areas of commonality and divergence. Regardless, the constructivist psychologies have grown immensely in quantity and influence over the past fifty years, originating in a variety of theoretical and research venues that have slowly developed greater contact with

each other and with psychology at large. In fact, as the 21<sup>st</sup> Century begins, constructivist psychologists find themselves standing at the crossroads, ready to make their mark on the broader discipline of psychology. However, despite their steadily growing influence, constructivist psychologies have not evolved into a single, coherent, theoretically consistent orientation. Given numerous theoretical differences, there is not even agreement among constructivist psychologists that arriving at a singularly recognizable orientation is desirable. Nevertheless, some constructivist psychologists' efforts to form a loosely confederated constructivist theoretical orientation have made inroads into mainstream psychology, as evidenced by the publication of several constructivist-themed volumes by the American Psychological Association (Neimeyer, 2001; Neimeyer & Mahoney, 1995; Neimeyer & Raskin, 2000). Even so, constructivist psychologists—perhaps due to their different historical and theoretical ancestries—have yet to make the same impact on psychology as earlier movements, such as psychoanalysis, radical behaviorism, cognitive psychology, and humanistic psychology. It seems that many American psychologists and students are still unfamiliar with constructivism, as evidenced by its exclusion from most psychology textbooks. This exclusion can at least in part be attributed to confusion about what constitutes constructivism. One comes across so many varieties of constructivist psychology that even the experts seem befuddled. Terms like “constructivism,” “constructionism,” and “constructive” are employed so idiosyncratically and inconsistently that at times they seem to defy definition. If the precise differences between the constructivist psychologies escape those who identify themselves as being “in the fold,” one can only imagine how bewildered non-constructivist psychologists must be. This is unfortunate because it undermines the possibility that constructivist ideas will attract a larger audience.

In light of these concerns, this paper attempts to clarify similarities and differences among three key constructivist psychologies. I describe “personal construct psychology,” “radical constructivism,” and “social constructionism.” I suggest—as has Lyddon (1995)—that the commonalities among these approaches outweigh the points of divergence. Highlighting this common ground should be useful to both psychologists and non-psychologists. I contend that all three approaches center on human meaning making as psychology's primary focus of inquiry. In comparing and contrasting these approaches, I try to overcome some of the convoluted jargon that has inhibited communication about the larger meaning of the constructivist movement.

## The Changing Nature of Knowledge

When psychologists use the term “constructivism” in its most general sense, what do they mean? In his historical analysis of the changing nature of knowing, Sexton (1997) divides human history into three distinct eras: premodern, modern, and postmodern. Each of these periods emphasized a particular ontological perspective that shaped how people dealt with events, problems, and solutions. The premodern era (from the sixth century B.C. through the Middle Ages) emphasized dualism, idealism, and rationalism. Faith and religion played central roles, and “effective change efforts were prayer, faith, thinking, and/or reasoning” (Sexton, 1997, p. 5). By comparison, the modern era (roughly from the Renaissance to the end of the nineteenth century, though modern thought still dominates much of current discourse) stressed empiricism, logical positivism, scientific methodology, the identification of objective truths, and validity. One consequence of the modern era

was to solidify scientific and professional knowledge as *the* legitimate source of understanding the world. Through the logical process of science we could discover that which was true. . . . Scientific knowledge was assumed to be a mirror image of objective reality. (Sexton, 1997, p. 7)

Sexton (1997) labels the third (and present) era as postmodern/constructivist and depicts it as accentuating the creation, rather than the discovery, of personal and social realities. The postmodern/constructivist era stresses the viability, as opposed to the validity, of knowledge claims. It also pays special attention to epistemological issues. Investigators and theorists become concerned with the how people know, as well as what they know. Compared to modernism (wherein truths independent of subjective bias are revealed to neutral scientists), postmodernism/constructivism highlights human participation in the construction of knowledge:

The perspective of the observer and the object of observation are inseparable; the nature of meaning is relative; phenomena are context-based; and the process of knowledge and understanding is social, inductive, hermeneutical, and qualitative. (Sexton, 1997, p. 8)

Because constructivism focuses on ways in which persons and societies create (rather than discover) constructions of reality, its adherents often exhibit varying degrees of skepticism about whether persons have direct and accurate access to an external world. In other words, constructivists see reality as

*noumenal*—that is, it lies beyond the reach of our most ambitious theories, whether personal or scientific, forever denying us as human beings the security of justifying our beliefs, faiths, and ideologies by simple recourse to “objective circumstances” outside ourselves. (Neimeyer, 1995, p. 3)

Thus, all constructivist psychologies share the belief that none of the many ways of understanding that people have developed provide a God’s Eye (i.e., purely objective) view of the world. All constructed meanings reflect a point of view. However, constructivists often disagree among themselves about the implications of this position, particularly regarding the nature of reality, the origin of constructed meaning, and the best way to conduct psychological research.

### **Epistemological and Hermeneutic Constructivisms**

Chiari and Nuzzo (1996b) argue that all constructivist psychologies attempt to conceptually bridge realist and idealist approaches to knowledge. Realism holds that “material objects exist externally to us and independently of our sense experience,” while idealism maintains that “no such material objects or external realities exist apart from our knowledge or consciousness of them, the whole world being dependent on the mind” (p. 166). Building on the idea that constructivist approaches grapple to overcome the realism-idealism dichotomy, Chiari and Nuzzo (1996b) distinguish two broad categories of constructivism—epistemological and hermeneutic. Particular theories of constructivism can presumably be located within one category or the other.

Epistemological constructivism. Epistemological constructivists are not purely idealists because they believe in the existence of an external reality that is independent of the observer. However, they also believe that it is not possible for observers to know that independent reality except through their constructions of it. Therefore, knowledge is a compilation of human-made constructions. Such constructions are heuristic fictions useful for understanding the world. In this regard, epistemological constructivism sees knowledge schemes as being classifiable as more or less viable rather than more or less accurate. People cannot know for certain if their constructions correspond to an independent reality, but they can know if their constructions work well for them. In this regard, people are cognitively closed systems: “In fact, it is really with the idea of a closure of cognitive systems that the subject/object dichotomy is substantially overcome and traditional realistic perspectives are actually abandoned” (Chiari & Nuzzo, 1996b, p. 171). Von Glasersfeld’s radical

constructivism seems to most clearly exemplify epistemological constructivism, although Kelly's personal construct psychology also fits nicely.

Hermeneutic constructivism. Hermeneutic constructivists do not believe in the existence of an observer-independent reality. They consider knowledge a product of the linguistic activity of a community of observers. Thus, there can be as many knowledge systems as there are groups discursively negotiating them. In hermeneutic approaches to constructivism, the roles of language, discourse, and communication become central in understanding how knowledge systems are developed and maintained. There are many forms of hermeneutic constructivism, but they all share certain fundamental premises.

Although their historical backgrounds are different, all these approaches share a view of knowledge (and truth) as interpretation, an interpretation historically founded rather than timeless, contextually verifiable rather than universally valid, and linguistically generated and socially negotiated rather than cognitively and individually produced. (Chiari & Nuzzo, 1996b, p. 174)

Gergen's social constructionism can be considered an example of hermeneutic constructivism and Maturana's radical constructivism appears to contain hermeneutic elements.

Limited realism. Chiari and Nuzzo (1996b) discuss a third approach to bridging the realism-idealism dimension. They call it limited realism. Limited realists believe that an external reality exists. They also contend that it is possible to know that reality directly. However, because human perception is fallible, limited realists assume that the correspondence between knowledge and reality is imperfect. According to Chiari and Nuzzo, cognitive psychologists such as Albert Ellis and Aaron Beck should be considered limited realists because they emphasize the correction of erroneous thinking that distorts reality or is illogical (DeRubeis & Beck, 1988; Dryden & Ellis, 1988). Thus, despite Ellis' recent claims to being a constructivist (Ellis, 1997, 1998), Chiari and Nuzzo's (1996b) criteria imply that his rational emotive therapy is a form of limited realism.

Some constructivists, such as Mahoney (1991), at times seem to espouse limited realism (Chiari & Nuzzo, 1996b). A case can even be made that Kelly's personal construct psychology—considered by many the first systematic use of constructivism within clinical psychology—is a form of limited realism (Stevens, 1998). Chiari and

Nuzzo (1996b) contend that limited realist approaches should not be considered constructivist because such approaches claim that subjective representations mirror, with varying degrees of accuracy, an independent reality. Chiari and Nuzzo (1996b) suggest

that the label *psychological constructivism* should be limited to the set of theories and approaches that strive to transcend the traditional opposition between realism and idealism by adopting the metatheoretical assumption that the structure and organization of the known—the knower as known included—are inextricably linked to the structure of the knower. The link may be in the form of an ordering and organization of a world constituted by the person’s experience (epistemological constructivism) or in the sense that operations of distinctions in language constitute the generation and validation of all reality (hermeneutic constructivism). (Chiari & Nuzzo, 1996b, p. 178)

I have outlined Chiari and Nuzzo’s (1996b) distinction between hermeneutic and epistemological constructivism to provide a framework for discussing three distinct psychological constructivisms: personal construct psychology (PCP), radical constructivism (RC), and social constructionism (SC). I do not consider this framework to be a “final” classification, but it does constitute one potentially helpful way to map the extensive constructivist terrain.

## **Personal Constructivism: Making Your Own Meaning**

### **Kelly’s Theory**

Personal constructivism, also referred to as personal construct psychology (PCP) or personal construct theory (PCT), originated with the pioneering work of George Kelly (1955/1991a, 1955/1991b). Kelly proposed that people organize their experiences by developing bipolar dimensions of meaning, or *personal constructs*. These hierarchically interrelated constructs are used to anticipate and predict how the world and its inhabitants might behave. By inventing dimensions of meaning that account for events, people organize psychological experience. Further, they continually test their personal constructs by tracking how well they predict life circumstances and by revising them when they are judged deficient. PCP uses the metaphor of the knowing

individual as a *personal scientist* who continually puts his or her constructions to the test. Closely tied to the ideas of personal science and personal construing is the concept of *constructive alternativism*, the foundational philosophical premise of PCP. Constructive alternativism postulates that there are infinite possibilities for conceptualizing events (Kelly, 1955/1991a). As their previous sets of constructions prove unsatisfying, people are free to creatively develop entirely new dimensions of meaning.

The extent to which the external world influences a person's constructions is given a great deal of attention in PCP. Both the viability and validity of constructions is valued. To many (but not all) personal construct theorists, some constructions are indeed better than others because of their predictive utility or better approximation of events in the world (Kelly, 1955/1991a, 1955/1991b; Landfield, 1980; Stevens, 1998; Walker, 1992; Warren, 1992, 1998). Personal construct theorists use Kelly's concept of "hostility" to describe those who hang onto faulty constructions in the face of invalidating evidence—in other words, hostile people try to force the world to fit their preferred constructions rather than altering their constructions to better fit the world. Although people can always feel free to construe events in novel ways, some PCP scholars see the world itself as unyielding in its essential qualities, rendering constructions that effectively reflect these qualities as intrinsically more useful than others.

In PCP, the self is commonly viewed as constructed, not discovered (Burr, Butt, & Epting, 1997; Epting & Amerikaner, 1980). It is generated by the way a person successively construes himself or herself. Often, deeply embedded and intransigent constructions of self—most often developed early in life, especially prior to the development of language, become impermeable to self-reflection and alteration. The person usually sees these elements, called core constructs, as unfiltered truths rather than constructed realities (Kelly, 1955/1991a, 1955/1991b). Because core constructs are so basic, it is a long and arduous task for people to reconstrue these aspects of themselves. Even in psychotherapy, enduring senses of self, the "I-me-mine" aspects of individual identity, are the hardest to modify. In Kelly's approach, social and relational factors play a role in the constructive process. However, individual persons are still seen as the prime source of their own constructions.

The formation of close relationships is based upon what PCP psychologists call *sociality*, which requires people to construe the constructs of others with whom they wish to interact. When done effectively, sociality leads to *role relationships*, in

which individuals are able to intimately understand one another (Kelly, 1970, 1955/1991a, 1955/1991b). Kelly developed his theory of personality with psychotherapy in mind. While eclectic in the sense that he encouraged clinicians to draw from a variety of clinical approaches, Kelly did develop an important therapeutic tool of his own called *fixed role therapy*. In this procedure, the client is asked to act out in everyday life the role of someone psychologically different from himself or herself. By prior agreement a client is encouraged to experiment for a set period of time with new modes of behaving and construing. Moreover, because of the experimental context, the client can do so without directly challenging his or her own sense of self; after all, the client is only acting! As a client experiments with these new ways of being, he or she has opportunities to incorporate new perspectives and possibilities into his or her sense of self. New possibilities are potentially opened. Fixed-role therapy is explicitly constructivist in the sense that it sees trying out new vantage points as central to change. It is a way to encourage the revision of personal constructions that have kept the individual stuck in ineffective problem-solving modes. For expanded descriptions of fixed-role therapy, see Epting (1984) and Kelly (1991/1955b).

### **Cognitive or Humanistic?**

To Kelly's amusement, personal constructivism has been claimed by many different theoretical orientations in psychology, including the psychoanalytic, behavioral, humanistic, and existential perspectives (Kelly, 1970). Within PCP's ranks, there is often disagreement over whether Kelly's approach is more closely related to cognitive-behavioral or humanistic-existential perspectives. Certainly, the "person as scientist" metaphor that Kelly used fits nicely with the cognitive paradigm's emphasis on rationally examining experiences as a basis for improving knowledge. The fact that Kelly structured PCP around a fundamental postulate and twelve corollaries (making it sound very logical, formal, and mathematical) makes it easy to see the theory as basically cognitive. When PCP is included in undergraduate personality texts, it most often appears as part of the cognitive section. Moreover, the just published second edition of the *Handbook of Cognitive-Behavioral Therapies* (Neimeyer & Raskin, 2001) includes PCP as part of a chapter on constructivism.

Nevertheless, a variety of PCP scholars persuasively argue that PCP is basically a humanistic theory. They point to the theory's emphasis on free choice and the creation of personal meaning. They also point to Kelly's strong distaste for anti-humanistic diagnostic traditions (Butt, 1998a, 2000; Epting & Leitner, 1992; Johnson,



Pfenninger, & Klion, 2000; Raskin & Epting, 1993, 1995; Raskin & Lewandowski, 2000). Humanistically oriented personal construct psychologists see the postulate and corollary style in which Kelly wrote his theory as a decoy originally intended to throw off Kelly's more traditional colleagues, who—in 1955 when the theory was first published—might not have been receptive to an overtly humanistic presentation style. Humanistic PCP'ers believe that those reading Kelly's theory as a cognitive approach are responding more to the presentation style than the underlying content, which includes a heavy emphasis on personal agency and self-determination (Epting & Leitner, 1992). Furthermore, Kelly consistently railed against paradigms that construe human subjects as passive objects of inquiry rather than active creators of their own personal meanings. Interestingly, at the time of his death, Kelly was in the process of rewriting his theory in a more accessible form (Maher, 1969), which some believe would have revealed humanistic underpinnings.

### **Epistemological Constructivism or Limited Realism?**

The cognitive versus humanistic debate leads to whether PCP is best viewed as an epistemological constructivist theory or a limited realist theory. PCP's emphasis on meaning as a primarily personal endeavor supports classifying it as a form of epistemological constructivism. That is, personal construct psychology generally conceptualizes people as more or less locked within their own personal meaning systems. Some interconnection between meaning systems is possible, based on the notion of sociality mentioned earlier (Kelly, 1955/1991a). However, despite sociality, the person in PCP is often seen as existing within a closed, idiosyncratic web of personal meanings. This easily allows PCP to be classified as a form of epistemological constructivism.

On the other hand, a case can be made that PCP contains elements of limited realism. Numerous PCP researchers argue that some constructions are indeed better than others if they conform more adequately to the contours of external reality. (Howard, 1997; Landfield, 1980; Stevens, 1998; Walker, 1992; Warren, 1992, 1998). Whereas epistemological constructivists emphasize the viability of knowledge structures, limited realists believe that some correspondence can be established between constructions and external reality, even if it is imperfect. Various PCP theorists consider PCP a version of limited realism, even though in Chiari and Nuzzo's (1996b) terms this implies that PCP is not a genuine constructivist approach. Fay Fransella, one of the leading personal construct psychologists and director of the Centre for Personal Construct Psychology, most vocally expresses concerns about classifying

PCP as a type of constructivism. She sees constructivism as a passing fad and worries that it might absorb PCP. Fransella (1995) argues, “if personal construct theory is allowed to be subsumed under the umbrella of constructivism as if it were *nothing but* constructivist, Kelly’s philosophy may well survive, but his theory will sink without trace” (p. 131). While not all PCP’ers share Fransella’s concern—instead arguing that PCP can only be enriched by greater contact with other constructivist approaches—her anxiety highlights unease about integrating constructivist approaches into a single orientation.

### **Radical Constructivism: Your Own Private Take on Reality**

Kelly’s personal constructivism is often seen as related to, but less extreme than, types of constructivism categorized as radical. It is to the radical constructivist theories of von Glasersfeld (1984, 1995a, 1995b) and Maturana (1988; Maturana & Varela, 1992; Varela, 1984) that I turn next.

#### **Von Glasersfeld’s Theory**

Von Glasersfeld’s radical constructivism emphasizes the ability of human beings to use the understandings they create to help them navigate life, regardless of whether or not such understandings match an external reality. Borrowing heavily from Darwinian evolutionary theory and Piagetian cognitive developmental theory, von Glasersfeld asserts that human perception is adaptive—it evolved to help people survive. However, von Glasersfeld distinguishes adaption from accuracy, stating that for radical constructivists, “adaptation does not mean adequation to an external world of things existing-in-themselves, but rather improving the organism’s equilibrium, i.e., its fit, relative to experienced constraints” (1995a, p. 63). Von Glasersfeld sees human cognition as a closed system. People are capable only of knowing when their constructions of events fail, but are never capable of knowing truth in any kind of direct, objective manner. In other words, von Glasersfeld replaces an emphasis on the validity of human perception with an emphasis on its viability. He neither denies the existence of an outside world, nor does he believe that people can ever have ontological access to that world: “Constructivism, thus, does not say there is no world and no other people, it merely holds that insofar as we know them, both the world and the others are models that we ourselves construct” (von Glasersfeld, 1995a, p. 137).

For von Glasersfeld, people only brush up against the real world when their constructions of it fail. External reality constrains people’s constructions of it;

constructions need to aid adaptation to a world that is not directly knowable. Von Glasersfeld relies extensively on the writings of Piaget in advancing the idea of cognitive adaptation. However, von Glasersfeld (1984, 1995a) contends that Piaget is often misunderstood by American psychologists, who interpret the Piagetian notions of accommodation and assimilation as evidence of Piaget's commitment to a realist epistemology. By contrast, von Glasersfeld argues that assimilation and accommodation are basically constructivist concepts. Assimilation is constructivist in that it entails taking information and adapting it to one's current experiential understandings. That is, it involves reducing "experiences to already existing sensorimotor or conceptual structures" (1995a, p. 63). This ties into Piagetian schema theory because von Glasersfeld sees mental schemes as involving assimilation. That is, the first part of a scheme involves recognizing (or re-presenting to oneself) a particular circumstance, the second part involves taking an action associated with that circumstance, and the third part involves the expectation that the action taken will produce a predicted result. Understanding schemas in this way helps make understandable how von Glasersfeld sees accommodation in constructivist terms. Rather than defining accommodation as altering one's schemas to more accurately reflect the world (as accommodation is commonly understood), von Glasersfeld (1995a) sees accommodation as a process "largely determined by the cognizing agent's unobservable expectations, rather than by what an observer may call sensory 'input'" (p. 66). In other words, it is the failure of one's internalized mental schemes, rather than the direct impact of external reality, that leads to accommodation. Further, von Glasersfeld is interested in the relationship between linguistically mediated human social interaction and accommodation. He argues that perturbation of a schema does not arise primarily from bumping into reality, but from internal and interpersonal transactions. As a result, von Glasersfeld does not assume that accommodation necessarily leads to increasingly accurate portrayals or representations of reality.

Von Glasersfeld thinks of people as operating in their own very private, self-constructed worlds. Language and social interaction allow for interpersonal communication, but never permit an individual to escape from encased isolation as a knowing being. While people accommodate within the framework of social interaction, they ultimately remain cognitively isolated.

There is no doubt that these subjective meanings get modified, honed, and adapted throughout their use in the course of social interactions. But this adaptation does not and cannot change the fact that the material an individual's meanings are composed of

can be taken only from that individual's own subjective experiences. (von Glasersfeld, 1995a, p. 137)

In this respect, “radical constructivism considers absolute meanings for words unattainable—that is, all speakers use private languages. Although specific words may be familiar, personal histories influence users to create unique meanings” (Loria, 1995, p. 156). Because people are locked inside their own subjective experiences, radical constructivists are interested in the ways that human beings establish and maintain communities. For instance, Efran and Fauber (1995) talk of the “communal choreography” made possible by language (p. 277). The characteristics of the social “dance” that people use to choreograph their lives is central to the radical constructivist views of biologist and cyberneticist Humberto Maturana, whose work I discuss next.

### **Maturana's Theory**

Maturana maintains that “problems do not exist apart from the observers who language them—they are created, or brought forth, in language” (Loria, 1995, p. 158). Such statements brand Maturana as even more radical than some of the others who fall under the radical constructivist heading (Efran & Fauber, 1995; Efran, Lukens, & Lukens, 1990; Kenny & Gardner, 1988). Central to Maturana's work is the concept of *autopoiesis*—the notion that organisms are, by definition, self-creating and self-sustaining systems. Maturana calls his position *structure determinism*. It presumes that any and all changes in organisms “are determined by their structure” (Maturana & Varela, 1992, p. 96). Like von Glasersfeld, Maturana sees living systems as cognitively closed. When living systems think they are mapping an external world, they are simply experiencing and processing their own structurally determined responses. Features of the external (or internal) environment enter into the equation by “triggering” changes in a living being's structural dynamics. However, the environment never directly “instructs” the system about how to behave. Depending on differences in structure, particular organisms are uniquely sensitive or totally unresponsive to particular kinds of environmental stimulation. A closed system never comes into direct contact with reality. What is “outside” never gets “inside.” Rather, the organism's existence consists of ongoing structural changes in relation to the surrounding medium in which it operates. Maturana refers to this history of accommodations as a *natural drift*. The drift is without intrinsic meaning or purpose and it lasts until a “disintegrating” event occurs—something that destroys the organism's autopoietic structure. At a more general level, no particular adaptation is

“objectively” better or worse than any other. All values (and evaluations) are products of human language exchanges. It is only through such language operations that meanings arise.

Central to autopoiesis is the concept of *structural coupling*, wherein two systems (or unities) recurrently interact in such a way as to form a unity of their own called a second-order unity. This happens on the basic biological level—the structural couplings of many smaller biological unities, for example, constitute higher evolved organisms. At the social level, individuals couple to form communities that, in turn, enhance their own survival. These are referred to as *third-order couplings* (Maturana & Varela, 1992). The social phenomena we associate with such couplings often develop within a *linguistic domain*. While many living organisms can operate within linguistic domains (e.g., Maturana and Varela [1992] discuss parrots, which use their songs to sustain mating rituals), human beings are relatively unique in their ability to harness self-reflexivity to create genuine languages. Using language, human beings are able to examine their own origins and to evaluate their own formulations of knowledge. However, it is important to keep in mind that despite the enormous human accomplishments that language makes possible, “every world brought forth necessarily hides its origins” (Maturana & Varela, 1992, p. 242).

Maturana’s work is of interest within constructivist psychology because it provides a framework for examining how human beings come to interact within social domains using language, creating and sustaining particular forms of knowing—what Maturana (1988) calls *explanatory domains*. Different explanatory domains legitimize different ways of validating experience. Maturana (1988) cites “games, science, religions, political doctrines, philosophical systems, and ideologies in general” (p. 33-34) as examples of explanatory domains. A person chooses to operate in different explanatory domains because “of his or her preference . . . for the basic premises that constitute the domain in which he or she operates” (Maturana, 1988, p. 33). For Maturana, the purpose in formulating autopoietic theory is not only “to understand the regularity of the world we are experiencing at every moment, but [to do so] without any point of reference independent of ourselves that would give certainty to our descriptions and cognitive assertions” (Maturana & Varela, 1992, p. 241). From Maturana’s perspective, “we are continuously immersed in [a] network of interactions, the results of which depend on history” (Maturana & Varela, 1992, p. 242).

## **Epistemological or Hermeneutic Constructivism?**

The epistemological constructivist label seems to more readily apply to von Glasersfeld than to Maturana. Von Glasersfeld and Maturana both see human beings as closed systems that cannot directly access external reality. This is in keeping with epistemological constructivism. However, both theorists also emphasize the role of language in sustaining social realities, implying a more hermeneutic constructivist approach. Von Glasersfeld, though, seems to root his ideas about language squarely within a paradigm that sees communication as imperfect—that is, unable to fully provide an individual with the meanings expressed by others.

Every learner of a language must construct his or her word meanings out of elements of individual experience. . . . There is no doubt that these subjective meanings get honed, modified, and adapted . . . in the course of social interactions. But this adaptation does not and cannot change the fact that the material an individual's meanings are composed of can be taken only from that individual's own subjective experience. (von Glasersfeld, 1995a, p. 137)

This proposes an even more isolated status for knowing than Kelly (1955/1991a, 1955/1991b) envisioned. In PCP, there is at least the concept of sociality, which holds that people can form relationships by successfully construing each other's constructions. Even so, both von Glasersfeld and Kelly can readily be categorized as epistemological constructivists. Both posit an isolated knower who indirectly bumps into external reality. The resulting perturbations lead the knower to revise his or her constructs to make them more instrumentally viable. Von Glasersfeld and Kelly's similarities are highlighted further in that both of them (as well as Maturana) outline approaches in which people are considered self-organizing systems whose ability to construe the world is determined by their psychological structures (Kenny & Gardner, 1988). Despite these theoretical similarities, Kelly's followers often conceive of his theory as a form of limited realism (Noaparast, 1995; Stevens, 1998; Walker, 1992; Warren, 1998). This perhaps explains why personal construct psychologists generally seem to be more tentative about the issue of external reality than their radical constructivist counterparts, who more outspokenly repudiate realist positions. Of course, despite von Glasersfeld's (1984, 1995a) outright rejection of realism (as compared to Kelly [1955/1991a, 1955/1991b], who was often coy on this topic), Kelly and von Glasersfeld are certainly "more realist" than Maturana. They both remain committed to the idea of a reality independent of the knower, even if the knower cannot ever access it completely. It is this feature of their thinking that leads to my

classifying both of them, in the final analysis, as epistemological constructivists rather than hermeneutic constructivists or limited realists.

Classifying Maturana is another matter. Maturana rejects representationalism, the idea that knowledge results from direct inputs from the external world. However, he also rejects the alternative, a kind of solipsism that ignores “the surrounding environment on the assumption that the nervous system functions completely in a vacuum, where everything is valid and everything is possible” (Maturana & Varela, 1992, p. 133-134). Nevertheless, Maturana frequently asserts, “there is no independently existing reality. We literally create the world by living in it” (Kenny & Gardner, 1988, p. 15). Maturana addresses this apparent contradiction by advocating sailing “between the Scylla monster of representationism and the Charybdis whirlpool of solipsism” (Maturana & Varela, 1992, p. 134). As a result, Maturana and Varela (1992) propose that people must distinguish two different kinds of explanation. The first kind is useful in studying the internal dynamics of a system; in such explanations, the external world is irrelevant in causing changes in the system because all such changes are determined solely by the organism’s structure, not by external inputs. The second kind of explanation is useful when people function as observers in studying other living beings; in these explanations, people posit ways in which environmental and organismic changes are interrelated. In other words, for Maturana, the truths one “discovers” vary in accordance with the positioning of the observer, which is always a matter of preference. Rather than seeing people as trapped in a set of private meanings expressed through language (and thus lacking the ability to fully comprehend each other’s communications), Maturana emphasizes the role of third-order couplings. Such couplings produce social unities. From this perspective, social systems are not merely collections of isolated individuals brushing up against one another but never legitimately coming into contact. Rather, social systems are emergent forms of organization created through third-order couplings. They sustain themselves because they foster the autopoiesis of their members. Social systems (i.e., communities) “bring forth” particular realities through the ways that they make and “language” distinctions. In this sense, reality is not something external. It is the result of a community’s elaborate attempts to coordinate its own activities:

‘Reality’ is wheeled on stage, not as an independently existing source of validation, but as a step in an argument to try to re-establish [a] lost co-ordination. In other words, ‘reality’ is employed as a compelling proposition to try to make the other person ‘see sense’. (Kenny & Gardner, 1988, p. 17)

Because Maturana refuses to talk about a reality independent of the observer, his theory seems best classified as a hermeneutic constructivism. Maturana's notion of "bringing forth" the world as we make distinctions typifies the hermeneutic posture.

### **Social Constructionism: The Discursive, Contextual, and Socially Constituted Person**

Unlike personal constructivism and radical constructivism—whose origins are generally credited to Kelly, von Glasersfeld, and Maturana—no single author has been given credit for originating social constructionism. In a recent article, Hruby (2001) delineates three models of social constructionism that derive, respectively, from (1) the sociology of knowledge research, most notably Berger and Luckmann's (1966) classic book, *The Social Construction of Reality*; (2) postmodern and poststructuralist perspectives in social psychology, with Kenneth Gergen's (1985, 1994) work being an exemplar; and (3) new realist perspectives, which hold that "there is a coherent and dependably consistent reality that is the basis for our sensations, even if our sensations do not resemble the causative phenomenal bases, or 'onta' that prompt them" (Hruby, 2001, p. 57). Most of the following discussion focuses on the second of Hruby's (2001) three models—with a particular focus on Kenneth Gergen's work, which is significantly influenced by his social psychology background.

Despite the many forms of social constructionism, virtually all those who identify themselves as social constructionists favor using the term "constructionism" rather than "constructivism." This distinction reflects the social constructionist's aversion to the notion of an isolated knower. Gergen, for example, has criticized radical constructivism as being too fully "interiorized" and, as a result, condemning human beings to imprisonment in their own, individualistic experience (Gergen, 1995b). By contrast, social constructionists emphasize the "primacy of relational, conversational, social practices as the source of individual psychic life" (Stam, 1998, p. 199). Social constructionists take issue with the traditional, Western individualism of American psychology, not to mention the rationalism of cognitive-behavioral perspectives—which some see as implied in PCP's "person as scientist" metaphor. In this context, it is interesting to note that Gergen once referred to Kelly's PCP as "perhaps the capstone theory of rationality" (Gergen, 1991, p. 40). On the other hand, whereas Kelly's theory is often applauded for its humanistic, existential, and phenomenological leanings (Butt, 1998a, 1998b; Epting & Leitner, 1992; Holland, 1970; Raskin & Epting, 1995), social constructionist approaches have been criticized



for being excessively anti-humanistic (Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1995a). Further, social constructionism is relativistic in emphasizing how contextual, linguistic, and relational factors combine to determine the kinds of human beings that people will become and how their views of the world will develop. In social constructionism all knowledge is considered local and fleeting. It is negotiated between people within a given context and time frame. What constitutes personhood one day may change the next, based on shifts in social surroundings and currently accepted interpersonal boundaries.

In a social constructionist paradigm, people are not considered to have any sort of stable and essential personality (Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1991, 1994). As Burr (1995) puts it, “there is no objective evidence that you can appeal to which would demonstrate the existence of your personality” (p. 21). Personality is a socially constructed idea. Gergen (1991) and other social constructionists contend that there are as many realities as there are cultures, contexts, and ways of communicating. The same goes for selves. Social constructionists often deconstruct the very idea of coherent selfhood (Sampson, 1989). Each of us has multiple, “multiphrenic” selves, which are socially constituted within the boundaries of culture, context, and language (Gergen, 1991). Personhood becomes a matter of how people are talked about, the social practices they engage in, and the particular relationships they find themselves in. Thus, “in order to account for the things you find yourself and other people doing . . . you have to come up with the idea that people have a thing called a personality that is responsible for this behaviour” (Burr, 1995, p. 21). Rather than emphasizing enduring qualities of each person from which human action springs forth—something akin to Carl Rogers’ (1959, 1961) innate self—social constructionists speak of “identity.” The ways in which someone is identified, talked about, and treated all contribute to creating a particular identity for the individual. Because a person is likely to be identified, talked about, and engaged by others in a variety of specific contexts, the person may actually come to live out different identities in each of those settings (Gergen, 1991). In their focus on constructed identities over essential selves, social constructionists categorically reject the very notion of an inherent human nature existing across persons. Each of us has a multitude of identities that are negotiated and defined within specific interpersonal relationships and cultural contexts. Human identity is fluid and constituted within the parameters set forward by social surroundings (Gergen, 1991, 1994).

The role of language is critical in social constructionism. How people talk about themselves and their world determines the nature of their experiences. For example,

because Americans live in a society that employs the language of agency and selfhood, freedom and independence become experientially real for Americans (Gergen, 1991). Of course, there are many different ways of talking about the world within any society's many subcultures. Because some ways of constructing reality through language become dominant over others, social constructionists are interested in the origins of power relations. How do some accounts become dominant while others are ignored or suppressed? In other words, why do some accounts *warrant voice* (i.e., get listened to and valued widely) while others do not (Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1989)? In examining this question, social constructionists draw extensively from Michel Foucault's writings on power relations (Rabinow, 1984). They have also been interested in the performative aspects of language. That is, people use words and symbols not just descriptively, but persuasively to accomplish goals (Burr, 1995). As a minor example, when I tell my spouse that I am tired, I am not simply describing my biological state. I am encouraging her to turn out the lights!

As I have mentioned, social constructionists argue that reality is socially negotiated. This is in contrast to the more isolated forms of personal knowing that characterize Kelly's and von Glasersfeld's theories. Further, social constructionism's reluctance to privilege knowledge developed in one context over knowledge developed in another make it a more relativistic approach than either personal or radical constructivism, which at least pay lip service to the idea that some constructions are better than others. Psychology as a whole has generally shown a lukewarm reception to social constructionism, perhaps because in many ways it directly challenges some of the discipline's most cherished assumptions. Through most of psychology's history, psychologists have focused on the individual. They have often ignored or minimized contextual and cultural factors. Psychology's laboratory studies have generally been designed to "control for" and eliminate "extraneous variables"—the very contextual factors that most interest social constructionists (Burr, 1995)! Social constructionism is about relationships. The focus is on what social constructionist John Shotter once called *joint action* (Shotter, 1993)—the cooperative development and implementation of shared functional meanings that arise when two or more people interact.

### **Social Constructionism as Hermeneutic Constructivism**

With the possible exception of the new realism that Hruby (2001) describes, social constructionism seems a clear example of Chiari and Nuzzo's (1996b) hermeneutic constructivism. Its emphasis on reality as constituted in language exemplifies the hermeneutic viewpoint. Reality, in social constructionism, is usually viewed as

dependent on how groups of people collectively elaborate their ideas. Thus, there are an infinite variety of socially constructed realities. In this context, Gergen (1991, 1994) has repeatedly pointed to the possibilities and complications of the current age, with its abundance of ultra-sophisticated communication technologies. Due to computers, cell phones, and other emerging forms of high tech communication, people can participate in a multitude of social contexts virtually simultaneously. As the number of contexts in which people participate expands exponentially, they often notice the contextually bound nature of truths that previously seemed enduring and universal. Gergen (1991) uses the terms *saturated self* and *multiphrenia* to describe the psychological experience of enacting so many different, socially constituted selves in such a short span of time. In premodern and modern times people interacted in precious few contexts. With few alternative intelligibilities to challenge the truth of these contexts, their socially constructed aspects remained masked. By contrast, in the postmodern psychological world people mix and match realities and identities in an increasingly complex array of circumstances. This expands possibilities, but makes judging one context's knowledge as superior to others a less than clear-cut endeavor.

The confusion this produces perhaps explains why many people criticize social constructionism for encouraging anything-goes relativism (Gillett, 1998; Held, 1995; Matthews, 1998; Parker, 1999). Critics suggest that without a single, stable reality on which to rely, people tend to feel lost and ungrounded. Interestingly, several social constructionists have argued the reverse position—that this inherent relativism is one of the strongest assets of the postmodern perspective, generating a less dogmatic and righteous society that is more open and flexible (Edwards, Ashmore, & Potter, 1995; Gergen, 1994; Raskin, 2001). Gergen (1994) has been especially vocal in defending the relativism of social constructionism, contending that it moves people toward interpersonal collaboration and the beneficial reexamination of sometimes stifling cultural practices.

### **Constructivist Integration: Problems and Prospects**

There is a great deal of room for cross-fertilization among the various constructivist psychologies. For example, I previously discussed how social constructionists prefer the term “constructionist” to signal their rejection of individualist and rationalist accounts, which they see as isolating and solipsistic. Yet Maturana's concept of third order coupling seems to echo, in many ways, social constructionism's effort to shift psychology's emphasis from decontextualized selves to socially constructed identities. From both perspectives, the social unit can be targeted for study. Although it is

beyond this manuscript's purview to detail all the potential linkages among types of constructivism, these perspectives do not seem as incommensurate as their devotees sometimes imply. Connections among constructivist approaches warrant further exploration. After all, even when they disagree about specifics, all varieties of constructivism challenge psychologists to refocus their attentions on the critical importance of the human meaning making process.

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#### Author Note

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## Appendix: Constructivist Psychology on the Internet (updated June 2019)

### Personal Construct Theory Links

- George Kelly Society: <http://www.kellysociety.org/>
- George Kelly Society News Blog: <http://kellysociety.org/news.html>
- Internet Encyclopaedia of PCP: <http://www.pcp-net.org/encyclopaedia/title.html>
- George Kelly (Oikos): <http://www.oikos.org/kelen.htm>
- George Kelly (Dr. C. George Boeree):  
<http://webpace.ship.edu/cgboer/kelly.html>
- Idiogrid: <http://www.idiogrid.com/>
- Personal Construct Psychology in Europe: <http://www.pcp-net.org/europe/home.html>

### Radical Constructivism Links

- Radical Constructivism: <http://www.univie.ac.at/constructivism/>
- CEPA Constructivist E-Paper Archive:  
<http://www.univie.ac.at/constructivism/archive/>
- Ernst von Glasersfeld (Oikos): <http://www.oikos.org/vonen.htm>
- Ernst von Glasersfeld: <http://www.univie.ac.at/constructivism/EvG/>
- Humberto Maturana (Oikos): <http://www.oikos.org/maten.htm>
- Humberto Maturana (Chilean School of Biology of Cognition):  
<http://www.inteco.cl/biology/index.htm>
- The Observer Web: Autopoiesis and Enaction:  
<http://www.enolagaia.com/AT.html>

### Social Constructionism Links

- Taos Institute: <http://www.taosinstitute.net/>
- The Virtual Faculty: <http://www.massey.ac.nz/~alock/virtual/welcome.htm>
- Kenneth Gergen:  
<http://www.swarthmore.edu/SocSci/kgergen1/Psychodiagnostics/>

## Narrative Links

- Narrative Approaches: <http://www.narrativeapproaches.com/>
- Narrative Psychology Internet and Resource Guide: <http://web.lemoyne.edu/~hevern/narpsych/narpsych.html>
- Theorists and Key Figures: <http://web.lemoyne.edu/~hevern/narpsych/narpsych.html>
- Coherence Therapy: <http://www.coherencetherapy.org/>

## Organizations, Therapy Centers, and Research Groups

- Constructivist Psychology Network (CPN): <http://www.constructivistpsych.org/>
- European Personal Construct Association (EPCA): <http://www.kellysociety.org/epca/>
- Australasian Personal Construct Group (APCG): <http://www.pcp-net.org/aus/>
- Centre for Personal Construct Psychology: <http://www.centrepccp.co.uk/>
- Institute of Constructivist Psychology: <http://www.icp-italia.it/en/>
- Personal Construct Psychology Association (PCPA): <https://www.personalconstructuk.org/>
- European Constructivist Training Network (ECTN): <http://www.pcp-net.org/ectn/>
- Taos Institute (social constructionism): <http://www.taosinstitute.net/>
- Constructivism and Discourse Processes Research Group: <http://recerca.blanquerna.url.edu/constructivisme/introduction.htm>
- International Network on Personal Meaning (INPM): <http://www.meaning.ca/>

## Journals and Newsletters

- *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*: <http://www.constructivistpsych.org/jcp>
- *Personal Construct Theory and Practice*: <http://www.pcp-net.org/journal/>
- *Constructivist Foundations* (e-journal): <http://www.univie.ac.at/constructivism/journal/>
- CPN news: <http://www.constructivistpsych.org/newsletter>
- George Kelly Society News Blog: <http://kellysociety.org/news.html>