

Kenneth Gergen's Social Constructionist Contributions to Counsellor Education

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Abstract Kenneth Gergen's seminal contributions to social constructionist thinking have substantial implications for the practice of counselling and psychotherapy, and thus for the training of practitioners as well. This article takes up the latter point, exploring the many deviations from traditional approaches to foundational counselling skills training that arise when educators are informed by constructionist philosophy. The article is written in the form of a dialogic exchange in recognition of Gergen's emphasis on the relational aspect of knowing, with contributions from two educators accustomed to training graduate level practitioners in basic counselling and psychotherapy practice.

Keywords Constructionist education · Counsellor training · Psychological discourses · Relational knowing · Social constructionism

Of the many generative insights Kenneth Gergen has articulated over the course of his highly prolific career, two in particular which are threaded through all of his work strongly informed the structure and process we chose for this article. The first may well be Gergen's preeminent theme: his musings about the relational aspect of knowledge and

meaning, the notions that "it is out of relationship that all we take to be real, rational, true and valuable emerge" (Gergen and Gergen 2004b, p. 451), and that descriptions and explanations are not the fruit of archaeological digs but "the result of human coordination of action" (Gergen 1994, p. 49).

Relationship is everywhere in Gergen's writing: it both spawns various forms of choices for going forward and is also impacted significantly by the choices we make: for instance, the means of representation one chooses fosters certain forms of relationship, including the relationship with the reader (Gergen and Gergen 2008). Positioning ourselves as objective evaluators who seek to elucidate the "essence" of Gergen's work as applied to counsellor education would contradict his central premise regarding the communally constructed character of knowledge and understanding (Gergen 2001a, b).

Following on these reflections, we decided to write in two voices. David Paré's account occupies the larger part of the article; however, his version of things is regularly punctuated by reflections from a second counsellor educator, Olga Sutherland. Although somewhat familiar with each other's work from a distance for some time, we met for the first time in recent weeks. This article is our first collaboration, and our dialogic format provides not only an alternative mode for sharing with readers, but is a vehicle for getting to know each other better as well. We also hope it counters the monologic tendency of scholarly prose, rendering our account more accessible, in line with Gergen's critique (Gergen and Gergen 2008) of the elitist nature of much academic writing.

The second familiar Gergenesque theme plays out here in another feature of how we chose to tell our story about Gergen's influence on our teaching of therapists. It is Gergen's relentless critique of claims to an objectively knowable world,

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reports of which are commonly construed as “subject to falsification or vindication as others test them against their observations” (Gergen 2001a, p. 805). This essentialist view has a tendency to erase the speaker, because universal proclamations about the “the world as it is” (p. 805) are taken to be the stuff of *true* knowledge, while expressions of subjectivity are regarded as somewhat flawed because they are grounded in the perspective of some particular reporting subject.

Gergen has found countless ways to remind us we cannot escape our subjectivity, an observation he celebrates repeatedly by pointing to the creative generativity that emerges from collaboration among persons with diverse perspectives. To keep our own subjectivity at the forefront, we will comment on Gergen’s contributions to the training of counsellors and therapists by featuring our personal experience as a counsellor educators as an alternative to speaking abstractly about the topic.

Overall, Gergen’s work suggests a substantial revision to the way practitioners are introduced to the craft. These pages will therefore feature the many social constructionist ideas and practices manifest in our teaching, which we will contrast with a range of (arguably still dominant) discourses within counsellor education. The account here does not purport to capture the breadth of Gergen’s contributions; the scope of those belies the space allotted. But it is our hope that the dialogue to follow will illustrate how the work of a scholar, more theorist than practitioner, has very concrete ramifications for the training of counsellors and therapists.

Discovering Gergen’s Alternate Perspective

David: Olga, I bumped into Gergen’s work when I returned to graduate school in 1990 following a decade as a journalist and professional writer. I was expecting to brush up on the foundational psychological knowledges I had absorbed during my earlier undergraduate degree in psychology and philosophy, and sure enough, I found myself re-encountering a cornucopia of constructs for making sense of fundamental topics such as “human nature” and “the change process” (Mahoney 1991). It was not a homogenous set: the constructs spoke to various robust theoretical discourses that had not changed much since my undergraduate studies 15 years earlier.

One discourse continuing to flourish in the long shadow of Sigmund Freud depicted people as governed by primordial forces which they contain, with only partial success, by conscious effort. This was the view of a “cauldron of seething and repressed motivational forces” (Gergen 1994, p. 40), a sort of boiler under pressure (Monk et al. 1997), threatening to burst forth and wreak havoc among civilized folk.

With its portrait of a vast and tenuously accessible unconscious territory, this view also suggested a cooler image, the iconic iceberg, whose relatively minute “tip” was to be deciphered for clues to what lay submerged.

The survey course on theory I started out with also caught me up on the latest iterations of discourses favouring a less Romantic view of human nature wherein “the image of the machine provided the dominant metaphor of the person” (Gergen 1991, p. 40). Here the machine is a biologically determined information processor. It responds to the world in elaborate sequences captured in flow charts featuring inputs and outputs contained by boxes and linked with bi-directional arrows.

A third prevalent discourse I got re-acquainted with at that time was threaded throughout my counselling skills training: this time the images are organic—acorns with the innate potential to grow into oaks, persons as developing towards wholeness and balance, authentic selves to be discovered and set free.

Each of these discourses had substantial track records, dating back in some cases as far as a century. They were carefully thought out and richly illustrated, and I found them all compelling for different reasons. Like many graduate students faced with the panoply of “intelligibilities” (a favourite expression of Gergen’s) before me, I wonder where I would locate myself as a theorist and practitioner. Under the influence of a mentor¹ with a background in family therapy, I then discovered a “lens on the floor of the universe” (Hoffman 1990, p. 1) called Postmodernism, and tumbled into a rabbit hole, encountering a new range of voices speaking the language of social constructionism.

Kenneth Gergen’s voice was everywhere then, and still is today—as readers will discover if they conduct a search of his writings and talks. In lucid language generously supported by innumerable scholarly sources, Gergen offered a compelling alternative to the various discourses I mentioned above. He did this not by painting a revised portrait of the person or of therapeutic change, but by inviting dialogue on more fundamental topics of knowledge and meaning.

Olga: An account of how I stumbled onto a social constructionist perspective in some ways resembles your own description. My fascination with constructionist ideas largely stems from my earlier dissatisfaction with the traditional definition and practice of therapy, particularly that of being trained to be the expert or “knowing one” (Gergen and Gergen 2008, p. 179) and associated practices of pathologization and normalization of human experience and action. From my earlier exposure to a socialist or communist society (I grew up in the former Soviet Union and immigrated to Canada 11 years ago), I also retained the value of communal sharing, equality, and collaboration and heightened awareness

¹ Don Sawatzky

of powerlessness and suffering resulting from oppression (e.g., sexism).

I also came to constructionism through my journeys through family therapy, and found myself quite at home in the social constructionist camp with its emphasis on collaboration and reflexive therapy practice. I was also drawn to what Gergen has called the “polyvocal” possibilities in therapeutic dialogue (Hoyt 2001), participating in reflecting processes wherein systemic, psychodynamic, strategic, structural, narrative, and other discourses—therapeutic and otherwise—were flying in the room, and were available for our mutual exploration and utilization. Gergen has suggested that ideally therapists are able to draw on a range of perspectives and discourses in interacting with clients. The focus is not on uncovering or implementing correct explanations but rather on the co-exploration of the value of proposed actions and ideas—“what they do to and for people” (p. 189).

The Blind Man and the Elephant: Theory Reconsidered

David: Despite the wide variety in theoretical accounts of human nature and action, some of which I summarized briefly above, they share a roughly similar epistemological position that social constructionism turns on its head. One way to capture this is through an old Indian folktale frequently used to describe the purpose of psychological theory (cf. Bernard and Goodyear 2009). In this story, a blind man attempts to ascertain the nature of a large beast that he can selectively touch but can’t apprehend in its totality because of his blindness. Each time his hand makes contact with the animal, he encounters a strikingly different feature: a tusk’s smooth cylindrical surface, an ear’s floppy lightness, the hide’s wrinkled roughness. Each contact with the animal gives rise to a different description.

This is the way psychological theory is often presented: as roughly accurate, but only partial accounts of the true, total state of affairs. Social constructionism highlights the flawed quality of this metaphor by reminding us that in drawing conclusions, the man in the story is inevitably engaged in a meaning-making enterprise, and that enterprise is always mediated by language which, as John Shotter (1993) said, acts as a sort of “prosthesis” we use to reach out and touch the world. Social constructionism suggests the descriptions of the elephant are more properly illustrative of the prosthesis itself rather than “things as they really are” (Paré 1996).

The dominant, modernist-informed psychological theories display considerable variation, but ultimately see people as shackled to biological and environmental substrata. Although packaged in innumerable variations, the theories are seen as pointing to the fundamentally “real” causal determinants

of human experience. Gergen (2001a) questions this view of “human beings as constituted by universal mechanisms (cognitive, emotional, etc.) causally related to environmental antecedents and behavioral consequences” (p. 805). He further invites us to attend not to the thing pointed to, but to the pointer itself: “this conception of the person is an outgrowth of a particular tradition—including both its linguistic genres and the institutions in which they are embedded” (p. 805). To put it differently, “the terms and forms by which we achieve understanding of the world and ourselves are social artifacts, products of historically and culturally situated interchanges among people” (Gergen 1994, p. 49), and “what one takes to be the real, what one believes to be transparently true about human functioning, is a by-product of communal construction” (Gergen 2001a, p. 806).

Reading Gergen in the 1990s, I found myself un-tethered from the compelling pull of well-formed psychological theories, increasingly pragmatic in my orientation. As the early American psychologist and pragmatist William James (1981/1890) said, truth is the compliment we pay to an idea that earns its keep. It became more important to consider how particular points of view “play out”—another favorite term of Gergen’s—rather than whether or not they are “true” representations of an ultimately unknowable reality lying somewhere out beyond the realm of human senses. I began to understand Wittgenstein’s (1953) observations that meaning is not a disembodied abstraction, but is performed in relationship, and that it is more critical to attend to the relational realities set in motion by psychological theories than to wrangle over their “accuracy”.

Olga: I found Gergen’s (1997, 2001) proposal to understand human action innovative by virtue of it not focusing to the individual “psyche” (which is a prominent focusing on the field of psychology), but rather attending to how knowledge is generated in specific contexts and relationships. On the surface, this appeared to me as yet another psychological formulation (not unlike behavioural, cognitive, or humanistic) that emphasized a particular aspect of human functioning, in this case the social. Examining the constructionist proposal deeper, however, yielded a different impression—the transformation in psychology’s overall orientation or paradigm (Kuhn 1970). Gergen (2001a) develops a compelling critique of a realist metaphysics and a correspondence theory of language, which have dominated psychology for years. He instead offers a constructionist metaphysics, which assumes the accuracy and usefulness of any theoretical formulation are products of social and interactive processes. By questioning the possibility of establishing transcendent grounds for justifying or falsifying psychological theories, social constructionism has the potential to foster a more pluralistic and inclusive ethic in professional and academic communities (Gergen 1997); this is what I

appreciate the most about Gergen's contribution, both as a counsellor and educator.

Introducing Psychological Theory as Cultural Construction

David: In my role as a counsellor educator, these various musings have led me to introduce graduate students to the notion of cultural discourse even prior to reviewing the theories they first encountered during their undergraduate studies. I remind them that psychological theories, no less than other aesthetic or intellectual movements, are the product of collective meaning making linked to particular contexts and historical moments. This is theory as constructed, not discovered, and suggests a "radical pluralism... an openness to many ways of naming and valuing" (Gergen and Gergen 2004b, p. 22).

Sharing these ideas makes for an interesting ride: many students cherish the notion of "expertise", and question what their years of schooling have given them if it is not this. They take reassurance from the monolithic authority of the dominant traditions buttressed, for example, by the practice of "confrontation"—a staple of basic counselor training applied to clients perceived to be overlooking or resisting "what is true" (Hackney and Cormier 2009, p. 33):

Once the counsellor has established a sense of trust and acceptance, clients are able to receive confrontation as a necessary part of the process. If fact, when a confrontation is rooted in a condition the client can recognize as true, it is often welcomed by the client. The confrontation is effective in those instances in which the client is experiencing but not acknowledging a condition, belief, or feeling that is part of the presenting problem. (p. 33)

There is a sense of a knowing certainty here, the notion that "the effective helper...is also able to 'go for the jugular'" (Young 2009, p. 20). Counterpoised against this, Gergen's acerbic observation that "the search for certainty is a child's romance" (Lock and Strong 2010) deflates the urge for sure-minded confrontation. The reminder from himself and his frequent collaborator Mary Gergen (Gergen and Gergen 2006) that "therapeutic traditions are themselves pockets of cultural meaning" (p. 48) further discourages the brandishing of an all-purpose theory, while raising an important question that has become commonplace—but only in the wake of persistent critiques like Gergen's: "why should there be a single meaning system useful for all people?" (p. 48).

Professional identity crises aside, many students welcome a constructionist perspective, speaking of how it gives voice to many of their cherished values. Among these: the

embrace of diversity that comes from celebrating multiplicity—multiplicity of theory, and multiplicity of clientele. I find constructionism's reflexive quality—that tendency to turn the mirror towards the sources of ideas and practices—does away with the necessity of construing "multicultural counselling" as some specialized subset of the discipline. This is not to diminish the importance of providing a platform for marginalized voices, but rather to make sense of *all* client difficulties in terms of the politics of meaning, rather than the expression of deficit, or deviance from a dominant norm (Gergen 1994; Shotter 1993; White 2007; White and Epston 1990). Whereas counsellors are frequently admonished to double-check the applicability of their theories when working with the "culturally different", Gergen's version of social constructionism confirms that we are *always* talking across difference, and that, as Lee et al. (2009) point out, "all counseling interactions are cross-cultural" (p. xix).

Olga: In my experience teaching personality and counselling theories and related courses, I similarly begin with introducing the perspectives that highlight the socially constituted and situated character of knowledge, and do so prior to examining specific psychological theories regarding the self and therapeutic change. Students seem to struggle with this reversed curriculum—they find social constructionist ideas to be "too far" (Andersen 1991) from what they have learned about human nature from other perspectives covered in a course. Most counselling and personality theories tend to share a premise that theorists' conceptualizations correspond to "real" dynamics "within" individuals and overlook socio-cultural contexts that give rise and sustain these ideas (Gergen 2001a). Essentialist, realist, and individualist premises, reflected in everyday language in many Western societies, seem more familiar and common sense to students.

For counselling students, the epistemological shift that accompanies an introduction to social constructionist ideas can be disorienting, both personally and professionally. Their previously pursued learning objective to become "armed with knowledge" of the discipline (Gergen and Kaye 1992, p. 169) no longer holds the same prominence. The focus shifts away from accumulating and applying (in de-contextualized ways) generic professional knowledge. Instead, the counsellor adopts a reflexive stance toward the client's narrative while learning how to collaboratively coordinate and co-construct alternative meanings (e.g., Anderson 1997; Hoffman 1992; White and Epston 1990).

Discourses of Progressive Infirmity

David: Gergen's therapeutic vision is primarily focused on the possibilities for alternative ways forward that emerge from generative relationship and dialogue (Gergen 2006;

McNamee and Gergen 1992). In this respect his emphasis differs from many narrative therapists (cf. Brown and Augusta-Scott 2007; Freedman and Combs 1996; Madigan 2010; White 1997; White and Epston 1990) who—inspired in particular by the work of Michel Foucault—make the deconstruction of dominant discourse more central to therapeutic work. I think this distinction in emphases is captured in an intriguing way by two different readings (Strong and Paré 2004) of my favorite quote of Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1981)—his observation that the word is only “half” ours:

Language has been completely taken over, shot through with intentions and accents... All words have the ‘taste’ of a profession, a genre, a tendency, a party, a particular work, a particular person, a generation, an age group, the day and hour. Each word tastes of the contexts in which it has lived its socially charged life... The word in language is half someone’s else’s. It becomes ‘one’s own’ when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent...[this] is a difficult and complicated process.” (p. 293)

Narrative therapists are inclined to hear this as a reminder of the stubborn entrenchment of dominant meanings—the “someone else” being no one in *particular* but an arbitrary normative standard for personhood against which we all measure our own worth. According to this reading, Bakhtin sheds light on how therapeutic conversations can be sites for resistance to dominant discourses, where clients can step into new territories of living (White 2007) as they reclaim personal agency. An alternate reading, perhaps closer to Gergen’s oeuvre, might suggest Bakhtin is pointing to how meaning emerges from the interplay between those conversing: here, the “someone else” is the therapist in the opposite chair. This reading puts more weight on the relational and dialogic process, and the creative possibilities in the room, despite the influence of discourses mirrored back (Hare-Mustin 1994) upon its inhabitants.

For many years I have witnessed debates and occasional infighting among colleagues over these distinctions. There are certainly differences in emphasis, but I have never been convinced the primary commitments of narrative therapy and Gergen’s version of constructionism are as different as they are made out to be. Gergen (1994) has long bemoaned the deficit focus encouraged by institutional forces such as the pharmaceutical industry that he says contribute to “progressive infirmity”:

As these constructions are disseminated to the culture, lives are affected; people may be incarcerated, sedated, discouraged, disparaged, stereotyped, and so on. In certain cases—for example, the success of the gay community in removing homosexuality from the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*

(American Psychiatric Association, 1994) and of parents in combating the diagnosis of attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder—the voices from the culture win out. In most cases, they do not.” (Gergen 2002, p. 464)

Like writings more closely associated with narrative therapy, Gergen (2006) affirms we cannot stand “nowhere”; his constructionism is not about a relativism that excludes the possibility of moral engagement: “From a constructionist standpoint even a posture of non-engagement or “neutrality” is viewed as ethical and political in its consequences” (p. 66). His message is that how we talk about people and with people can promote generativity and possibility, or produce “cultural enfeeblement” (p. 107): “In its discourses of deficit—of disease, pathology, and dysfunction—the mental health professions prosper through the expansion of human misery” (p. 107).

I engage my students around these ideas by inviting them to reflect on the impact of labeling on themselves or on people they know—what Michael White would refer to as the “real effects” on identity of particular ways of speaking and making meaning. An important point here, well developed in Gergen’s work, is that discourses are not mere abstractions but are “performed” (Wittgenstein 1953). And so talk is tangibly “consequential” (Strong 2006; Strong and Paré 2004). I therefore encourage students to focus on how their interactions play out for clients, rather than fretting about how well they adhere to particular models or intervention protocols. This leads to a revision of traditional pathology-focused approaches to assessment and a curiosity that extends as much to what is working as to what is challenging in a client’s life.

Olga: Gergen (1995) expresses a number of concerns with perspectives (more often associated with narrative therapy) that he saw as emphasizing social structure and overlooking the role and agency of individuals who comprise such structures. One of his concerns is that these perspectives seem to inconsistently imply socio-cultural determinism (i.e., people think and act in culturally-prescribed ways) while advancing an emancipatory agenda or belief in individuals’ capacity to transcend and liberate themselves from the societal and institutional constraints. Overall, he critiqued the dualism that places “individuals on one side and institutions on the other” (p. 32). Gergen’s critique clearly does not exclude the “macro” concerns (e.g., socio-political conditions that give rise to illness or identity categories); instead, the focus is on the “micro” processes, which are envisioned as the sites where the micro and macro merge. Hosking (2006) conveys Gergen’s ideas in the following manner: “relational processes have a local cultural-historical quality such that discourses of the past and future are constructed and reconstructed in an ongoing present” (p. 272). In other words, the “larger” culture both informs

the local relational practices and is simultaneously reconstructed through them.

Therapist Positioning

David: Olga, like you, I took great comfort in the constructionist critique when I first encountered it, because it offered an alternative to dominant strains of self-congratulatory judgmentalism whereby “the client is indirectly informed that he or she is ignorant, insensitive, woolly-headed, or emotionally incapable of comprehending reality. In contrast, the therapist is positioned as all-knowing and wise—a model to which the client must aspire” (Gergen and Kaye 1992, p. 171).

Gergen’s epistemological analysis upsets this top-down perspective, tilting a domino that sets a remarkable chain of events in action. Once psychological theory is divested of conceits to universal applicability, it becomes clear that therapy adhering to assumptions of cross-contextual truth is centrally concerned with legislating certain prescribed ways of being. I invite students to notice the normative quality of traditional therapeutic approaches, to consider how they project an “image of the ‘fully functioning’ or ‘good’ individual... the guiding model for the therapeutic outcome” (Gergen and Kaye 1992, p. 172).

One activity I use to consolidate this learning is to invite students to engage in what Harlene Anderson calls an “as if” exercise. In parallel “case conferences”, students discuss a client from either a normative position, or a constructionist one characterized by tentativeness, curiosity about what seems to be working for the client, and an orientation to possibility. Meanwhile, students assuming the role of clients listen in, reporting back on the experience. The ensuing discussion demonstrates the significant repercussions for clients when counsellors speak from the differing positions.

The notion that one can relinquish an expert stance while still assuming a “position” can be challenging for students to grasp. However, while Gergen’s critique calls into question the colonizing (Todd and Wade 1994) quality of traditional practices, it does not advocate some unattainable “therapist neutrality”. Instead, the practitioner orients with ongoing curiosity—a position of “not-knowing” (Anderson 1997; Anderson and Goolishian 1992). Gergen (1999) elaborates on the sense of the term:

The constructionist therapist must enter the consultation with a stance of *not knowing*, that is of relinquishing the grasp of professional realities, and remaining curious and open to the client’s vocabularies of meaning. In this case it is not the therapist’s task to ‘lead the way to knowledge’ but to collaborate with the individual (or family) in generative conversations. (p. 170)

The collaboration Gergen speaks of leaves room for the knowledge of therapists, who are not expected to “abandon all previous understanding, but rather, see past experiences as offering possible resources for enriching the therapeutic conversation” (Gergen and Gergen 2004b, p. 51).

Strong (2001) introduces a metaphor to capture this, which my students have found particularly helpful. He suggests counsellor and client construct an “our house” from “my house” and “your house”. I’ll say more about this in the next section; the point here is that under the influence of constructionism, the therapist stance morphs from one approximating unilateral information transmission (Sfard 1998) to a bilateral process of collaborative co-construction: “it is within the relational matrix of therapist-and-client that meaning evolves” (Gergen 2006, p. 72).

I find many students struggle with finding this middle ground. Some dole out advice unrestrainedly, feeling unsure how to convert potentially useful hunches, professional constructs, or personal experiences into fodder for mutual examination. Others, paralyzed by the prospect of foisting their realities on clients, flounder in indecision; having jettisoned claims to expert knowledge, they feel there is no occasion to bring any of their knowledge to the table.

Olga, I have found your own notion of therapist “persistence” (Sutherland et al. 2012) useful here: the notion that in acknowledging the multiplicity of discourses in circulation, the counsellor may nevertheless bring certain perspectives and practices to the conversation rather than relinquishing them at any moment when the client signals some alternate view. The key here is in how the practitioner “holds” what they bring and how they negotiate the way forward with clients. The “position” here is more like a process, for as Gergen and Gergen (2004b) said, “the social constructionist orientation is not a fixed set of principles, but rather, a continuing dialogue on the processes by which we generate meaning together” (p. 299).

Olga: Gergen (2004) recommends that instead of abandoning their professional knowledge, therapists should broaden the repertoire of preferred discourses to explore culturally and conversationally marginalized meanings and possibilities. Larner’s (1994) conceptualization of postmodern therapies as “para-modern” resonates with this proposal. Challenging the dichotomy of modern/postmodern, rooted in a modernist binary (either/or) logic, Larner suggests that para-modern therapists use their “expert” knowledge playfully while being open to non-professional explanations. He proposes that “the conversation can then go on in a way that is *not* family therapy, which paradoxically opens up and enriches the vocabulary and discourse of family therapy (p. 15).

Another potentially helpful concept I have found helpful to introduce to counselling students is *hypothesizing* (Selvini-Palazzoli et al. 1980). Fine and Turner (1995) contrast *client-*

sensitive and *therapist-sensitive* hypothesizing, with the latter being defined as therapists' self-informed, theoretically based ideas that are not yet fine tuned to the "ears" of the client. For them, therapist-sensitive hypotheses are ideally adjusted to the language and perspective of clients in order to increase the relevance, meaningfulness, and acceptability of those hypotheses. Duncan and Miller (2000) similarly argue that a perspective "must be acceptable to the client in order to have a chance of being successful" (p. 24). They further emphasize that adhering to one perspective or approach to therapy may limit therapists in their abilities to be helpful to clients, who may not join therapists in their proposed formulations.

Therapy as Constructive Conversation

David: Olga, your reflections point to what I described earlier as Gergen's pre-eminent theme, the relational aspect of knowledge and meaning. This leads to a view of therapy that stands in stark contrast with the image of the professional who assesses relative to a normative standard, and then intervenes based on purported "best practice". Instead, therapy becomes a venue for the co-construction of meaning through conversation (Anderson and Goolishian 1988).

It does seem odd that in a discipline devoted to the "talking cure", the emphasis on *counseling as conversation* has so far been largely absent (Paré 2011). Instead, the talk that takes place in the consultation room is typically depicted as a medium for delivering an intervention seen as distinct from the conversation itself. I think it makes more sense to understand the conversation *as* the intervention: it is the *talk itself* that is helpful. Gergen's (2006) take on this: "the therapist's most valuable resources are conversational actions... not the storehouse of facts, concepts, distinctions and so on that the therapist has at his or her disposal that counts, but the capacity for flexibility in relationship. 'knowing how' as opposed to 'knowing that'" (p. 47).

This notion catches many students off guard because it casts a different light on their own recently amassed storehouses of knowledge. On top of this, they are often under the sway of medicalized definitions of "intervention", suggesting for instance the wielding of a scalpel or the scribbling of a prescription. These are not primarily about conversational skill. In some contexts it is not absurd to claim "she's an excellent doctor, but a lousy talker and listener". In reference to a counsellor or therapist, this conclusion constitutes a confusingly contradictory message.

Understood in these terms, therapeutic skill is less about linking treatment with presenting concern, and more about coordinating talk: "communication is inherently collaborative" (Gergen 2006, p. 36). The task here is not *corrective*, but *constructive*; "the therapist functions as a major collaborator in the generation of meaning" (p. 45). Therapeutic

conversations are venues in which clients participate as full authors of their lives (White 1995), giving "assisted" birth to new and helpful meanings and corresponding actions.

These ideas serve as a reminder that students come to their "skills" training with long histories of using conversation to accomplish myriad purposes. I invite them to notice their substantial track records of "doing things with words" (Austin 1965)—engaging with full competence in coordinated social interactions (Garfinkel 1967) to complete such tasks as issuing apologies, persuading skeptics, negotiating agreements, and so on. Their training becomes not the introduction to a technical skill but the refinement and expansion of existing capacities, the development of a reflexive, mindful relationship to conversation practice. This attention to the students' own pre-existing competence mirrors the orientation of constructionist-informed therapeutic work. Freed from causal and deterministic accounts of human development, the sequelae of trauma and so on, constructionism re-invents therapy as a context for moving from—as White (2007) has put it—the "known and familiar" to "what is possible to know".

Olga: Gergen's ideas highlight the aspect of counsellor education and development frequently overlooked in the counselling literature—namely, the idea that being an "effective" counsellor is not necessarily about demonstrating skills or techniques or producing correct answers on a test assessing professional knowledge. Rather, it is about being able to *participate* in relationships with clients therapeutically (Gergen in Hoyt 2001). Here, what counts as "therapeutic" is coordinated and established locally, yet informed by broader cultural meanings. Students are supported in learning how to coordinate meaning with clients, not just when communication breaks down but throughout therapy. This may entail counsellors being responsive to the client's pace, concerns, goals, and theories of change (Duncan and Miller 2000); confirming understandings of clients' talk and showing willingness to explore unplanned directions (Anderson 1997); being open to their ideas being contested by clients (O'Hanlon and Weiner-Davis 2003); or improvising with language to find shared ways of moving forward in a conversation (Strong 2006).

Conversations about Competence

David: Of late, there has been a marked surge of interest in Positive Psychology and in the utility of attending to what is working, rather than what is broken. This idea has been around for a much longer time among the postmodern approaches to therapy, many of them strongly associated with social constructionism.

One of various ways to make sense of how this shift comes about through constructionism is to look at conceptions of

identity prevalent in modernist-informed practice—whether behavioural, humanistic, or cognitively-oriented. In their own ways, these approaches lean towards an essentialist notion of self and identity, the idea that assessment assists in determining what is “there”, and intervention acts to change it. There are many modernist versions of how people get to be “who they are”, but what these versions share is the notion of a monolithic selfhood.

Under the sway of discourses of evolutionary biology and brain science, one take is to see biology as destiny, a view that ignores the cultural processes so central to a constructionist understanding of lived experience:

Culture and the quest for meaning within culture are the proper causes of human action. The biological substrate, this so-called universals of human nature, is not a cause of action but, at most, a *constraint* upon it or a *condition* for it. The engine in the car does not “cause” us to drive to the supermarket for the week’s shopping, any more than our biological reproductive system “causes” us with very high odds to marry somebody from our own social class, ethnic group, and so on. (Bruner 1990, p. 21)

Another modernist-inspired take on the formation of selfhood, possibly more familiar to therapists, is the notion that early experience shapes identity. This is a sort of cultural (vs. biological) determinism that Gergen (1995) critiques for overlooking the re-construction of experience that happens here and now in the therapeutic dialogue. But it is not just constructionism’s emphasis on the generative possibility of talk that leads to a different view of selfhood, one that sees more room to move, more creative possibilities at hand. An orientation to the multiplicity of co-existing cultural discourses or narratives makes room for a pluralistic “self” which stands in sharp contrast to the notion of “authenticity” which is another cornerstone of traditional counsellor education.

Counsellors in training are routinely coached to be “congruent” (Hackney and Cormier 2009; Mearns 1997; MacCluskie 2010) and “authentic” (Corey 2005) so that they might “facilitate the emergence of authenticity in the client” (Capuzzi and Gross 2007, p. 173). The idea here is that one is *either* real *or* not real, and that in being real in their work, counsellors help clients “innately move toward self-actualization and health” (p. 193).

Constructionism both breaks the shackles of these various deterministic views, as well as freeing itself from the task of guiding clients to express, or reclaim, or develop into, some purported essence. Instead, client *preferences* are of central concern, and a key therapeutic task is to engage according to an ethic of care (Paré 2011), perennially mindful of how what one says and does in the moment contributes to versions of self arising. This frees the talk up to

attend to competence, resources, gaps in problem-saturated (White and Epston 1990) accounts. Of the many ideas associated with Gergen’s work, his legitimization of therapeutic practices that *celebrate* persons has been among the most moving and meaningful to me.

In the collaborative therapies (Anderson 1997; Anderson and Gehart 2007), this non-pathologizing orientation encourages the view that problems are in language, not persons, and can be dissolved through conversation. In narrative therapy (Freedman and Combs 1996; White 2007), it expresses itself in a fierce commitment to each person’s “respectworthiness” (Hancock and Epston 2010; Nelson 2001)—the view of therapeutic conversations as venues for “dignifying” (Epston and Marsten 2010; Wade 2010) people by attending to their active expressions of value, purpose, and intention in the face of life challenges. In solution-focused therapy (de Jong and Berg 2008; de Shazer and Dolan 2008; Walter and Peller 2000), *if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it* is a guiding mantra of a variety of therapeutic approaches that doggedly pursue exceptions to problems rather than engaging in corrective interventions.

These distinctions from modernist-informed therapies make for significant revisions to counsellor education curricula. I train students in “double listening” (Carey et al. 2009; White 2003, 2007), attending to things not always stated explicitly by clients that speak to resources, competencies, and purposes—all of which can be exploited to useful ends. I encourage students to bring this pragmatic curiosity to conversations in a manner that *brings forth* rather than *sets forth*, as Karl Tomm demonstrated in his exhaustive explorations of therapeutic questioning (1987a; 1987b; 1988).

Collaboration is a key word among constructionist-informed therapies. Following on the lucid deconstruction by Gergen and others of claims to the overriding legitimacy of certain knowledges, it makes more sense to find out *from clients* what meanings and practices resonate with and are useful to them—what Duncan and Miller (2000) have referred to as clients’ theories of change. This is a strikingly different orientation from traditions that assume therapists’ expert interpretations trump client views—the notion that “in order to move beyond dysfunctional thought processes to more freeing thoughts, resistance must be confronted” (Hackney and Cormier 2009, p. 233).

The practice of confrontation continues to be a staple of much counsellor and therapist skills training. It is a way of making sense of client behaviours that encourages a strategic orientation to the work, founded on the notion that “resistant clients...show little willingness to establish a working relationship with helpers, and frequently try to con counsellors” (Egan 2002, p. 165).

A constructionist-oriented practitioner is not engaged by debates about what is “really” going on, not drawn to

practices designed to break down purported “denial” or ferret out ostensible “resistance”. Indeed, that which might otherwise be seen as resistance is understood instead as “cooperation” (de Shazer 1984) because it involves clients doing just what one would want them to do: providing clear statements of their current preferences for how they would like to go forward in the therapeutic dialogue.

Olga: Liberal humanism has dominated the counselling field since 1960s. From this perspective, “individuals are capable of being in charge of their own lives and ... [have] the freedom to be self-guided, self-governed, and effective in their pursuit of personal growth and development” (Brew 2008, p. 265; Sinclair and Monk 2005). Competence is located *within* counsellors and presented as an intrinsic ability of counsellors to adequately perform a role or a task. It can be argued that counsellors adopting a liberal humanist position risk pathologizing experiences of clients (Gergen 2007). Counsellor educators may similarly overlook socio-cultural factors shaping students’ work clients and their own observations of students’ development and abilities. Gergen (2001a, 2007) innovatively challenges this notion of singular, self-guided self and directs attention to both the broader and immediate dialogical factors shaping human action, identity, and development.

Closing Reflections

David and Olga: His carefully elucidated critique of mainstream psychology was already evident in the early Seventies (Gergen 1971, 1973), when Gergen took on his discipline, for the knowledge claims it was making and the use made of those claims (Lock and Strong 2010). The ramifications of that critique have branched out in countless directions for 30-plus years, a small handful of which we have been able to touch on here in relation to our work as counsellor educators.

By speaking from within the field of psychology, and in terms understandable to professionals and the general public, Gergen has managed to exert wide influence in favor of ideas and practices brimming with forward-looking optimism. He does this by highlighting the possibilities that open up in relinquishing an ethnocentric grip on purported truths which too often become justifications for conflict and violence. And he does it in a voice unwavering in its commitment to dialogue and collaboration.

As counsellor educators, Gergen’s contributions have injected a hopefulness into our work. From our earlier concerns about traditions that inadvertently duplicate forms of oppression contributing to the problems clients face, we have the privilege of introducing a rich array of generative alternatives, and watching the transformations that happen as students step into these energizing ideas and practices.

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