

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST PROJECT IN THE WORK OF KENNETH GERGEN^{1 2}

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ABSTRACT. Kenneth Gergen is one of the main voices of the social constructionist discourse in Psychology. Despite his importance in the dissemination of social constructionism, there is a shortage of studies on the elaboration of his thought. In this sense, analyzing the formation process of the constructionist project in the work of Kenneth Gergen would allow us to denaturalize what social constructionism is, as well as respond to the need to take seriously its criticisms and proposals. Thus, the objective of this study is to analyze the development of the social constructionist project in the work of Kenneth Gergen. Methodologically, we seek to track the process of theoretical construction, the extensions and suppressions of the concepts present in the main texts of the author. The analysis made it possible to characterize significant moments of his work, such as: a) the initial works; b) criticism of empiricism; c) the social constructionist movement; and d) toward science as performance and relational practices. In addition, it pointed out how the emphasis on relationships reconfigures the social constructionist project, sustained by questioning in three significant fields: the role of science, the status of the social, and the definition of self. The analytical exercise carried out explains the complexity of Kenneth Gergen's thinking and contextualizes the constructionist project within a work still under development.

Keywords: Social constructionism; theory; Kenneth J. Gergen.

O DESENVOLVIMENTO DO PROJETO CONSTRUCIONISTA SOCIAL NA OBRA DE KENNETH GERGEN

RESUMO. Kenneth Gergen é um dos principais articuladores de um discurso construcionista social em psicologia. Apesar de sua importância na difusão do construcionismo social, há uma escassez de estudos sobre a elaboração de seu pensamento atual. Nesse sentido, analisar o processo de formação do projeto construcionista na obra de Kenneth Gergen permite desnaturalizar o que seja o construcionismo social, bem como, responde à necessidade de levar a sério suas críticas e propostas. Assim, o objetivo deste estudo é analisar o desenvolvimento do projeto construcionista social na obra de Kenneth Gergen. Metodologicamente, buscamos rastrear o processo de construção teórica, as ampliações e supressões dos conceitos presentes nos principais textos do autor. A análise realizada permitiu caracterizar momentos significativos de sua obra, tais como: a) os trabalhos iniciais; b) a crítica ao empiricismo; c) o movimento construcionista social; e d) em direção à ciência como performance e às

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práticas relacionais. Além disso, apontou como a ênfase no relacionamento redimensiona o projeto construcionista social ao longo da obra, sustentada por questionamentos em três campos significativos: o papel da ciência; o status do social e a definição de *self*. O exercício analítico realizado explicita a complexidade do pensamento de Kenneth Gergen e situa o projeto construcionista no contexto de uma obra ainda em desenvolvimento.

Palavras-chave: Construcionismo social; teoria; Kenneth J. Gergen.

EL DESARROLLO DEL PROYECTO CONSTRUCCIONISTA SOCIAL EN LA OBRA DE KENNETH GERGEN

RESUMEN. Kenneth Gergen es uno de los principales articuladores de un discurso construcccionista social en Psicología. A pesar de su importancia en la difusión del construcionismo social, hay una escasez de estudios sobre la elaboración de su pensamiento. En ese sentido, analizar el proceso de formación del proyecto construcccionista en la obra de Kenneth Gergen permitiría desnaturalizar lo que sea el construcionismo social, así como, respondería a la necesidad de tomar seriamente sus críticas y propuestas. Así, el objetivo de este estudio es analizar el desarrollo del proyecto construcccionista social en la obra de Kenneth Gergen. Metodológicamente, buscamos rastrear el proceso de construcción teórica, las extensiones y supresiones de los conceptos presentes en los principales textos del autor. El análisis realizado permitió caracterizar momentos significativos de su obra, tales como: a) los trabajos iniciales; b) la crítica al empirismo; c) el movimiento construcccionista social; y d) hacia la ciencia como performance y las prácticas relacionales. Además, señaló cómo el énfasis en la relación reconfigura el proyecto construcccionista social, sostenido por cuestionamientos en tres campos significativos: el papel de la ciencia; el estatus de lo social; y la definición de *self*. El ejercicio analítico realizado explicita la complejidad del pensamiento de Kenneth Gergen y contextualiza el proyecto construcccionista en el contexto de una obra aún en desarrollo.

Palabras clave: Construcccionista social; teoría; Kenneth J. Gergen.

Introduction

Kenneth Gergen, an American psychologist, has been identified as one of the primary proponents of social constructionist discourse in psychology (Burr, 1995; Hibberd, 2005). Social constructionism is an intellectual movement in psychology that supports a social perspective on knowledge production (Guanaes-Lorenzi et al., 2014; Spink, 1999). Based on social, ideological, and rhetorical-literary critiques of traditional scientific practices, constructionism emphasizes a sociohistorical approach to analyzing knowledge production processes. It also affirms the performative nature of language and its impact on constructing reality (Gergen, 1994).

An analysis of his work allows us to deconstruct social constructionism. Tracing Gergen's career reveals different moments, emphases, and approaches, as well as distances from social constructionism. Understanding this theoretical movement allows us to better define how his constructionist project developed. The term "constructionist project" emphasizes the dynamic and open-ended nature of his work and recognizes the particularity of constructionism in his texts. This distinguishes his work from other proposals within the heterogeneous body of constructionism in psychology.

Furthermore, analyzing the process of constructing the constructionist project in Kenneth Gergen's work acknowledges the need to take his critiques and proposals seriously. From a theoretical perspective, Gergen himself noted how the critical furor during the 'crisis of social psychology' subsided, causing many issues to cease being analyzed (Gergen, 1982). At the same time, due to the diversity of perspectives on social constructionism and the bureaucratic and competitive ways of organizing relationships within the scientific community, such critical efforts became a rhetoric of opposition and clash (Shotter & Lanamann, 2002). At times, little was done to promote mutual understanding or a deeper understanding of the proposals of each author.

In addition, the investment in the development of practices inspired by constructionism in various professional fields in the more recent period of Gergen's work (2009) has, on the one hand, stimulated the dissemination of constructionist ideas, which have the potential to transform everyday life. However, this has also pushed aside the emphasis on theoretical-conceptual analysis. In the Brazilian context, the growth of publications in recent years and their distribution in various national journals, combined with the wide dispersion of production across universities, the emergence of research groups and professional training institutes, and specific events for debating social constructionism, demonstrate how the movement is expanding within the psychology community (Rasera et al., 2019). Nevertheless, the growth in the use of social constructionism in Brazil has not always been associated with in-depth theoretical and methodological reflection, with some important exceptions.

Thus, whether from the perspective of theoretical production or the social relations of the constructionist community, analyzing how the constructionist project was constructed can significantly enrich the process of knowledge production in this field, as well as its application across different specialties within psychology.

In this context, the general objective of this study is to analyze the development of the social constructionist project in Kenneth Gergen's work. Specifically, we will: 1) produce a narrative that considers the historical context of the development of the constructionist project and 2) critically analyze tensions in the constructionist argument throughout Kenneth Gergen's texts that led to new theoretical developments.

Methodologically, this study is based on constructionist reflections on scientific practice (Gergen, 1994, 1999, 2009). In light of his critique of empiricist, ahistorical, and universalizing psychological science, Gergen redefines the role of science, emphasizing its dual function of supporting intelligibilities that facilitate the coordination of human action and promoting the destabilization of conventions through internal and cultural critique. In this study, we seek to advance the internal critique Gergen (1994) proposed. This critique involves researchers evaluating and reflecting on their descriptions of reality. It is facilitated by developing a deconstructive stance, which makes the constructed nature of things explicit and questions the authority and transcendence of any description (Gergen, 1994).

This analytical exercise particularly resembles Gergen's concept of 'literary-rhetorical critique' in science. This concept explains how scientific descriptions are limited by the rules of scientific writing and how their persuasive power stems from the use of specific presentation forms. Methodologically, there is no specific set of operational procedures to be carried out a priori. Influenced by discourse analysis, the analyst's task is to observe the metaphors, narrative constructions, rhetorical strategies, and development and expansion or suppression of concepts present in the set of texts studied (Gergen, 1999). Thus, rather than seeking the truest or most accurate description of the development of Kenneth Gergen's argument, the analysis aims to promote an 'anti-foundational dialogue' in which

the emphasis is “[...] on the socio-discursive matrix from which knowledge claims emerge and from which their justification is derived” (Gergen, 1996, p. 77).

In this analysis process, we first identified significant moments in Kenneth Gergen's intellectual trajectory. Then, we briefly pointed out some issues that permeate the development of his constructionist project.

Significant moments in his intellectual trajectory

Tracing an author's academic career helps us understand their work's materiality, the social context in which it is embedded, and the development of their theoretical contributions. Kenneth Gergen earned his bachelor's degree from Yale University (1953–57) and his doctorate from Duke University (1959–62). After spending four years as an assistant professor of social psychology at Harvard University, he became a professor in the psychology department at Swarthmore College in 1967, where he remains to this day. Over the course of his 50-year career, Gergen has published 38 books (including his own works and edited collections) and approximately 530 texts, including articles, book chapters, prefaces, and commentaries. His body of work continues to expand.

Despite Kenneth Gergen's importance in articulating and disseminating social constructionism, studies on his theoretical proposals and the development of his thought are scarce, which highlights the relevance and challenges of analyzing his work. In an attempt to understand how his contributions have transformed over the years, we can identify significant moments in his intellectual trajectory by considering the main debates he has promoted in the scientific community, despite the lack of periodizations of his work available in the literature.

The attempt to define certain moments in his work does not align with the description of clearly defined moments in his thought, where the rejection of certain ideas is evident. This is an important point for two reasons: first, the author's work lacks significant shifts that would allow for such easy designation; second, his themes and concerns develop in a spiraling fashion, being revisited and given new meanings in an ongoing process.

However, the attempt to identify some historical markers responds to Gergen's proposal that we consider social psychology as history and the need for a sensitivity guided by the “[...] the interrelation of events over extended periods of time.” (Gergen, 1973, p. 319). Based on this understanding, and the previous warning, we can point out significant moments in the author's work, such as: a) initial works (up to 1973); b) critique of empiricism in psychology (from 1973 to 1985); c) social constructionist movement (1985 to 2000); d) science as performance and relational practices (after 2000).

Initial works

Early in his career, Gergen worked as an experimental social psychologist, investigating a variety of topics, with a special emphasis on the construction of the self and patterns of interpersonal relationships. His studies included self-presentation, personality and social interaction, social attraction, conformity, prosocial behavior, social comparison, and others. During this period, he published several articles as well as *The Psychology of Behavior Exchange* (Gergen, 1969) and *The Concept of Self* (Gergen, 1971).

Even in these early works, Gergen questioned the concept of a coherent, unified, and stable self. He analyzed forms of self-presentation and their interpersonal determinants. At the same time, he offered a social analysis of the life cycle, particularly aging (Gergen & Back, 1966). Concerns about the self and social relationships remained ever-present in Gergen's work, and he revisited them in later works.

During this period, his origins as an experimental social psychologist are clearly visible. He discusses various experiments on social behavior that he and/or other researchers developed. It is important to note that the author produced his critique and proposed a change in social psychology from his involvement in this community and an analysis of its bottlenecks. The final chapter of *The Psychology of Behavior Exchange* (Gergen, 1969) anticipates critiques that would later contribute to the thesis of social psychology as history.

Critique of empiricism in psychology

In 1973, Gergen published his arguably most controversial text, the article *Social Psychology as History* (Gergen, 1973), in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*. Typical of his writing style, this theoretical essay employs critical rhetoric and is based on a broad domain of psychological theory, citing various authors and works, and is clearly structured into themes and subthemes. It is a seminal text whose ideas were refined throughout the author's subsequent work. According to Gergen himself, "The thesis of the Social Psychology as History article could be viewed as a first step toward constructionism" (Aceros, 2012, p. 1004).

In this text, the author argues

that social psychology is primarily a historical inquiry. Unlike the natural sciences, it deals with facts that are largely nonrepeatable and which fluctuate markedly over time. [...] Knowledge cannot accumulate in the usual scientific sense because such knowledge does not generally transcend its historical boundaries" (Gergen, 1973, p. 310)

Much of the article discusses the impact of science on social behavior and the inevitable historical insertion of psychological theories. He criticized the assumptions that science is cumulative, the supposed independence between the observer and the observed, and the alleged neutrality of knowledge. On the one hand, he showed how psychological theories modify the patterns of behavior they claim to explain through the prescriptive bias of psychological theory, the behavioral liberation promoted by knowledge of psychological theories, and the resistance to the predictive power of well-established theories. On the other hand, Gergen argued that theoretical principles of psychology are strongly linked to historical circumstances. To support this claim, he analyzed studies on political activism, cognitive dissonance, and reinforcement schedules.

He concludes the text by describing some implications for a historical science of social behavior, namely: the necessary integration of pure and applied research; the replacement of behavior prediction with an awareness of the range of possible occurrences; the importance of developing a technology of psychologically sensitive social indicators; the value of research methods that allow us to discern the relative durability of social phenomena, locating them on a 'continuum of historical durability'; the search for an interdisciplinary understanding; and the support of the idea that "[...] social psychological research is primarily the systematic study of contemporary history" (Gergen, 1973, p. 319).

Considering the mainstream of social psychology at the time, especially the American context in which Gergen was embedded, the critiques were notable. Due to the metatheoretical nature of his argument and its diverse implications, various authors engaged in a cycle of critiques and responses regarding specific aspects of his proposals. Overall, the ideas presented amplified the so-called 'crisis in social psychology' (Ibáñez & Íñiguez, 1997).

The critiques did not deter Gergen. In the book *Toward Transformation in Social Knowledge* (Gergen, 1982), he expanded and deepened the previous discussion by exploring the impasses of hypothesis testing, control experiments, descriptive language in science, and the full meaning of empirical research in psychology. Based on his critique of the view of science as a representation of reality guided by the values of accuracy and truth, Gergen emphasized the importance of considering a generative theory (Gergen, 1978, 1982) aimed at questioning common assumptions to enable new forms of action.

Ultimately, in his quest to build a new science and an alternative to the empiricist model, he pointed to what he calls 'sociorationalism.' According to Gergen, sociorationalism is a metatheory that:

That is, in contrast to the empiricist position, we find a metatheory that places the locus of knowledge not in the minds of single individuals, but in the collectivity. It is not the internal processes of the individual that generate what is taken for knowledge, but a social process of communication. It is within the process of social interchange that rationality is generated [...] Within the emergent paradigm knowledge is a communal creation (Gergen, 1982, p. 207).

The proposition of sociorationalism, in embryonic form, appears in the final pages of the book and seems to point to a transition from a period strongly marked by a rhetoric of opposition to a discourse of construction. However, it is important to note the emphasis on discussing knowledge production from a perspective based on categories such as theories and metatheories, combined with incipient attention to language and timid concern with social change. Both of these topics will gain relevance later.

Social constructionist movement in psychology

A few years later, in 1985, Gergen published *The Social Constructionist Movement in Modern Psychology* in *American Psychologist*. Recalling the aforementioned discussions, he revisited the topic of sociorationalism, offering a new designation and expanding on it. Beyond affirming a metatheory, he defined his theoretical efforts more broadly as part of a movement: the social constructionist movement. Gergen shifted his focus from criticizing the status quo to making a clear, comprehensive proposal for producing knowledge in psychology geared toward social transformation. At this point, he defined constructionism as a form of social inquiry that "[...] is principally concerned with explicating the processes by which people come to describe, explain, or otherwise account for the world (including themselves) in which they live." (Gergen, 1985, p. 266).

In the same article, Gergen presents central features of a constructionist perspective on knowledge. Rasera and Japur (2001, p. 202)) summarize them as follows::

- 1) Descriptions of the world do not correspond to a reality situated beyond the ways of expressing it, but are themselves ways of constructing this reality.
- 2) Descriptions of the world result from the coordination of human action, that is, from meanings constructed in relationships. These descriptions are products of historical exchanges between people. Thus, the logical possibility of countless forms of description. Descriptions of reality are limited by the concrete conditions of historical and cultural constructions of systems of signification.
- 3) The persistence of certain descriptions of the world over time depends on the vicissitudes of the social processes of negotiation, communication, conflict, and consensus within a linguistic community rather than on their objective validity.
- 4) Certain 'communities of intelligibility' can produce assessments of the credibility and acceptability of statements based on their constitutive relationships. However, existing validity criteria do not allow for self-assessment or assessing the impact of certain sets of statements on nearby communities. Therefore, it is necessary to critically evaluate the various intelligibilities from a different perspective

and explore their impact on culture. Once communities can absorb such assessments, new forms of dialogue will emerge between them.

After outlining the assumptions of a constructionist approach, Gergen presents a narrative about the origins of social constructionism. He identifies multiple roots in different authors and bodies of knowledge. Rather than positioning himself as the original author of a theoretical proposal, Gergen defines constructionism as a movement and positions himself as one of its articulators and disseminators. Likewise, he anticipates criticisms and opposition to this approach's contributions to psychological knowledge.

Contributing to the affirmation of a constructionist discourse, Gergen published the book *The Saturated Self* (Gergen, 1991), in which he analyzes the social conditions that led to the emergence of romantic and modern discourses on the self. He highlights the historicity of how the self is conceived. In this context, he analyzes the postmodern world, which is marked by the multiplicity of interconnections between different cultures, the expansion of networks of relationships, and the resulting conflicts and moral obligations.

Despite the success of the book and the widespread dissemination of constructionism, in 1994, in the preface to the second edition of *Toward Transformation in Social Knowledge*, Gergen reflects on the previous impact of his work. He expresses his disappointment with psychologists who initially joined the critique of empiricist and individualizing psychology but soon returned to traditional research practices without advancing the reflections proposed by constructionism.

That same year, Gergen published *Reality and Relationships: Soundings in Social Construction* (Gergen, 1994). For the most part, this book is a collection of revised and refined texts from the author's previous presentations. In it, Gergen reflects on the crisis of representation, the emergence of social constructionism and deficit discourse, the pathologization of life, the notion of objectivity as a rhetorical enterprise, the redefinition of the self and emotions as relational, and the concept of narrative change in a therapeutic context. He also presents a rudimentary theory of meaning. In two chapters of this book, Gergen addresses his critics directly, identifying and answering the main questions raised by social constructionism. Specifically, he addresses the following topics: the place of personal experience, the definition of reality, ontological relativism, moral relativism, conceptual relativism, the problem of scientific progress, the danger of elitism, and the definition of change. Gergen advances the construction of a relational redefinition of psychological vocabulary in this book, expanding his theorizing on the role of language in constructing reality. At the same time, despite turning to academia and developing various theoretical analyses, he began addressing questions related to professional practices.

In this sense, in the second half of this period, there appears to be a growing concern about the expansion of social constructionism beyond academic circles. This expansion is evident through two processes: the publication of books aimed at students and professionals, as well as the establishment of the Taos Institute. Several of Gergen's texts are written in an erudite style that assumes the reader has extensive knowledge of the field, which hinders understanding outside of academic circles. Beginning in the late 1990s, Gergen started publishing books such as *An Invitation to Social Construction* (Gergen, 1999), which describes the ideas from *Reality and Relationships: Soundings in Social Construction* (1994) in a less erudite manner with numerous everyday examples. These books aim to be understood by a lay community.

The Taos Institute was founded in 1993 by Harlene Anderson, David Cooperrider, Mary Gergen, Kenneth Gergen, Sheila McNamee, Suresh Srivastva, and Diana Whitney. The Institute's mission is to "explore, develop, and disseminate ideas and practices that

foster creative, appreciative, and collaborative processes in all aspects of society and throughout the world [...] by [...] developing ways in which academic research and professional practice can meaningfully enrich each other" (Taos Institute, n.d.). The creation of the Institute values the knowledge and concerns of professionals from diverse fields and catalyzes an applied, pragmatic version of constructionism that will develop in the years to come.

Science as performance and relational practices

Throughout the 2000s, the dissemination of social constructionism among students and professionals beyond the research world became more consolidated. For example, Gergen published books identifying the main authors and ideas that support the social constructionist approach (Gergen & Gergen, 2003) and offering an introduction to the main ideas and applications of constructionism (Gergen & Gergen, 2004). Moreover, more publications addressed the interests of professional psychologists. In the 1990s, Gergen edited two books that explored issues of professional practice: *Therapy as Social Construction* (McNamee & Gergen, 1991), which addressed the different forms of clinical practice influenced by social constructionist discourse, and *Management and Organization: Relational Alternatives to Individualism* (Hosking et al., 1995), which considered new ways of working in institutions and organizations. After 2000, the search for closer ties with clinical and organizational contexts gained momentum through the publication of other books such as *Therapeutic Realities, Collaboration, Oppression and Relational Flow* (Gergen, 2006) and *The Appreciative Organization* (Anderson et al., 2008).

In the clinical setting, concepts and practices stemming from narrative therapy, reflective processes, and a collaborative approach are presented and examined. Interestingly, Gergen's writings ultimately provide epistemological support for a series of innovations occurring in the field of psychotherapy at that time. The study analyzes the implications of constructionist thinking for defining problems and facilitating change in psychotherapy. It recognizes the socially constructed nature of language, as well as its ability to construct therapeutic reality and its performative power. It critically questions the role of diagnoses in mental health and reexamines therapists' roles and their ways of relating to clients (Gergen, 2006, 2007).

In the field of organizational studies, the potential of concepts such as relational leadership and appreciative inquiry is explored. Relational leadership challenges the idea that leadership stems from an individual's personal knowledge and skills. Instead, it shifts the focus to leadership emerging from dialogues between individuals that belong to a network of relationships, and therefore to the way a community functions. Appreciative inquiry, on the other hand, is an approach that focuses on the resources and future potential of human systems. Rather than exploring problems, it seeks the dreams and goals of groups. Appreciative inquiry's methodology invites participants to recapture the group's best moments, identify its resources, share them, and promote them in the process of organizational change (Anderson et al., 2008).

In the following decade, these contributions to practice expanded to encompass the field of education (Dragonas et al., 2015; Gergen & Gill, 2020). Adopting a broad approach, these books discuss dialogical, appreciative, and relational proposals for teaching and learning processes, as well as changes in school institutions. Significantly, those books critique the 'tyranny of testing,' exams, measurement, standardization, and the factory model of schooling. Those books also advocate for relational, collaborative, and participatory

assessment based on the idea that education is a social good and that schools are a 'myriad of ongoing conversations.'

In these three fields, Gergen acts as a debate promoter and coordinator. These books are generally collections of texts by various authors, organized by Gergen and another collaborator. Although he is not traditionally a professional in these areas, nor a researcher of these topics, he promotes theoretical analyses of certain aspects of these practices. Thus, he contributes to the development of a constructionist discourse on different professional practices, which he calls 'relational practices' (Gergen, 2009).

This pursuit of practice is rooted in a constructionist conception of science. Gergen continually rethinks the role of research and knowledge production. He distances himself more and more from the conception of knowledge as representation, focusing instead on its performative and transformative nature. Recognizing the limitations of describing the meaning of the world, which he previously defined as the focus of constructionist research in *The Social Constructionist Movement in Modern Psychology*, Gergen argues that research must create new worlds (Gergen, 2014).

He then advocates for a performative social science (Gergen & Gergen, 2012), which is based on three concerns. First, he acknowledges that science is presented (performed) for others; thus, it becomes important to consider: Who is the audience? Which audience is excluded? What can we learn by comparing communication in the social sciences with communication in the arts? Second, he reclaims the notion of performance in Austin's speech act theory, noting that words act and foster relationships. He turns his attention to what we construct with traditional modes of writing and speaking in science. Third, he highlights the aesthetic skills involved in scientific practices such as observing, interviewing, and reporting. In this way, Gergen aligns himself with a series of questions present in the social sciences, expanding his critique of scientific practices and addressing aspects not previously considered. In *Relational Being*, Gergen employs various rhetorical and stylistic techniques. Sometimes he uses an academic voice; other times, he uses a voice more in tune with that of professionals. Sometimes he shares personal experiences and those of colleagues. Sometimes he incorporates different forms of art, poetry, and photography. It is important to note that this is not merely a procedural critique, but an invitation to analyze the ethical implications of constructing science and its relations with society.

This concern for society and others outside of the research community, whether through the proposition of a performative science or through attention to professional practices, is also associated with a redefinition of constructionism as a relational theory. In *Relational Being: Beyond Self and Community* (2009), Gergen (2009) seeks to describe human action by prioritizing relationships over individuals and understanding individuals as creations of relationships. In his words, "My hope, on the contrary, is to begin with an account of relational process and derive from it a conception of individual consciousness" (Gergen, 2009, p. xxii). This idea was first presented in *Toward Transformation in Social Knowledge* (Gergen, 1982) and incorporates new concepts, such as co-action, action coordination, and multi-being. These concepts imbue the proposal with a 'strong relationality' (Slife, 2004) and differentiate it from other sociological and philosophical analyses of social being. Gergen revisits and explores these ideas in *The Relational Imperative* (2021), discussing how to respond to today's challenges in education, health, governance, and conflict resolution through more accessible language.

Throughout his career, Gergen broadened his reflections on scientific practice to include more general reflections on human nature and various social practices. He reviewed

the form of scientific expression and sought to contribute to the creation of alternative forms of common life.

Toward the expansion of relationality: Implications for the Social Constructionist Project

Examining the narrative of Gergen's work reveals the main themes of his studies and significant moments in his career, each of which offers the possibility of further study. Beyond this quasi-chronological approach, it is important to recognize the issues permeating his texts and identify how recent concepts produce shifts and redefinitions that may offer insight into the development and potential future of the constructionist project in his work.

One of the main issues raised by Gergen's recent publications seems to be an expansion of relationality. While the importance of social exchange was already evident in his earliest publications (Gergen, 1969) and reaffirmed in his formulation of social constructionism (Gergen, 1985, 1994), it takes on a new dimension in his current writings (Gergen, 2009, 2021). This shift has significant implications for the trajectory of the social constructionist project. This expansion has implications in three significant areas: the role of science, the status of the social, and the definition of the self.

In Gergen's work, the definition of science, its *modus operandi*, and its goals are central but change over time. From a perspective focused on the possibilities of knowledge production, Gergen offers a striking critique of psychology's individualistic, empiricist, universalizing, and ahistorical assumptions (Gergen, 1973). Gergen then questions the conditions under which scientific authority develops and focuses on establishing an orientation for scientific practice. This orientation is guided by the recognition of the social and historical embeddedness of relationships between researchers and the theories they produce (Gergen, 1985). Gergen further develops this orientation by proposing a performative social science that challenges the canons of scientific writing and presentation, as well as the limits and objectives of scientific knowledge (Gergen & Gergen, 2012).

The development of this argument about science is central to the process of establishing a constructionist movement within the scientific community and seems to paradoxically, and ultimately, question the status and very definition of social constructionism. Unlike his previous works, in *Relational Being, Beyond Self and Community* (Gergen, 2009), *Playing with Purpose: Adventures in Performative Social Science* (Gergen & Gergen, 2012), and *The Relational Imperative* (Gergen, 2021), Gergen does not appear to be explicitly committed to developing a social constructionist discourse. Instead of referring to a constructionist orientation, perspective, or movement, he uses the term 'relational theory' in various forms. Interestingly, in a text circulated among Taos Institute members in 2011 titled *Why I Am Not a Social Constructionist*, he warns of the ontological and ethical risks of such a statement. Along with this, he attempts to reframe his text as an 'exercise in theory' (Gergen, 2009) towards "[...] particular forms of social practice." (Gergen, 2009, p. xxiii). Thus, the question remains: In Gergen's work on the place of science in society, could there be a reorientation of the assertion of social constructionism as a scientific movement with theoretical concerns toward a way of thinking about human relationality as "[...] a relation-centered alternative" (Gergen, 2009, p. xv) focused on social practices?

On the other hand, this emphasis on relationality seems to indicate a shift in the status of the social within the social constructionist movement. In *Social Psychology as History* (Gergen, 1973), the social is related to the insertion of knowledge into long historical periods, the sociohistorical construction of science, and the production of social realities. When

defining social constructionism, Gergen (1994) highlights the constitutive dimension of discursive practices and social discourses, as well as highlighting the importance of cultural and historical recontextualizations in knowledge production. In *Relational Being* and *The Relational Imperative* (Gergen, 2009, 2021), he questions communitarian emphases that view the community as a circumscribed entity as problematic as its individual counterpart, the bounded being, and proposes transcending both traditions. He then encourages relational reflection based on metaphors supported by systems theory, actor-network theory, distributed cognition, biological interdependence, process philosophy, and Buddhist philosophy. These metaphors offer distinct versions of what is understood as relational. They go beyond relationships between people to incorporate relationships with objects, materialities, and other animals. They also affirm the processuality and interdependence between entities and events in the world. Would the emphasis on relationality, therefore, imply a redefinition of the social in constructionism? What would the social vision be? What role do history and language play? Or would it be relational constructionism, as some authors claim? (Hosking & Pluut, 2010).

The definition of the self is considered by many to be central to the field of psychology. Gergen explored this concept at different times and in different works. Initially, Gergen questioned whether the self-concept refers to processes internal to individuals (Gergen, 1971). Then, he sought to explore the historical conditions of the emergence of modern and romantic discourses on the self, as well as the characteristics of a saturated self (Gergen, 1991). Simultaneously, he analyzed the self as a set of narratives about oneself, sustained by oneself and others (Gergen, 1994). Finally, he ceased referring to the self, adopting the perspectives of multiple beings (multi-being) and relational flow (Gergen, 2009, 2021).

On the one hand, the attempt to go beyond the concept of self seems to be the logical consequence of a broad, unrestricted, relational redescription of concepts in psychology. On the other hand, the affirmation of multiple beings, paradoxically, could be interpreted as an ontological assertion, always denied in the constructionist proposals made by Gergen throughout his work (Gergen, 1994; Rasera & Japur, 2007). However, in *Relational Being* (Gergen, 2009), the debate on the self is combined with that of agency, with the author's proposal to replace an analysis of causality—that is, of relationships between distinct entities—with an analysis of confluence, that is, of “[...] a form of life in this case that is constituted by an array of mutually defining ‘entities’.” (Gergen, 2009, p. 54). Since the “[...] ultimate confluence is beyond description” (Gergen, 2009, p. 59), it seems that ontological muteness (Gergen, 1994) appears to be reestablished in different terms. In other words, Gergen's understanding of the impossibility of describing reality independently of language appears to persist in his recent theoretical development. What changes between affirming social constructionism as ontologically mute and confluence beyond description? Relationships would remain the origin of the process of producing meaning, but would the role of language in constructing the world and understanding it be redefined? Ultimately, what kind of constructionism is constructed considering the shift of interest from the self to the multi-being and relational flow?

Final considerations

The analysis was based on a selection of very diverse and rich texts, and other narratives would be possible depending on the author's purpose. This reading offers a specific perspective on part of Kenneth Gergen's work and seeks to illuminate questions that may arise in developing the constructionist project. In other words, examining the past

invites us to consider the future. What has been constructed through social constructionism, and what is intended to be constructed?

This question is intended to stimulate thought and encourage researchers in the field to recognize which aspects of Gergen's work they utilize, how these aspects fit into the body of his texts, and what new conversations they wish to create. Thus, the analysis and questions in this text do not aim to produce a coherent version of social constructionism that would lead to a finished, final, or uncritical definition. As Gergen (1994, p. 69) states, "Constructionist arguments generally militate against fixed and final formulations, even those of their own making." The invitation is to reflect and expand the dialogue.

This broadening of the dialogue can also be fueled by voices speaking about the author's biography, the historical context of social psychology, and critiques of Gergen's ideas, going beyond the internal debate between Gergen's texts that was prioritized in this text. Thus, we hope that this study demonstrates the importance and necessity of, in a strict sense, producing arguments for the questions raised throughout the analysis and developing further analytical and conceptual investigations into Gergen's work. This will enrich and expand the analysis presented here.

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