Critique, Construction, and Co-creation: A Conversation with Kenneth Gergen

(Interviewed by Mark Freeman, College of the Holy Cross)

In 1967, Ken Gergen took the position as chair of the Department of Psychology at Swarthmore College. He is now Research Professor at Swarthmore. At other times, Ken has served as a visiting professor at the University of Heidelberg, the University of Marburg, the Sorbonne, and at the University of Rome, Kyoto, and other places. In an attempt to link his academic work to societal practices, Ken collaborated with colleagues to create the Taos Institute in 1996.

Ken Gergen has won numerous awards. They include research grants from the National Science Foundation, the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, and the Barra Foundation and additional awards from the American Psychological Association, the National Communication Association, Constructivist Psychology Network, the University of Buenos Aires, and Adolfo Ibanez University in Santiago. He's also received fellowships from the

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Guggenheim Foundation, the Fulbright Foundation, and the Alexander Humboldt Foundation.

Ken has also written a number of important and influential books. *The Saturated Self* (1991), subtitled *Dilemmas of Identity in Contemporary Life* (1991) is one; among numerous others, there's also *Realities and Relationships: Soundings in Social Construction* (1994); *An Invitation to Social Construction* (1999); and, I believe most recently, *Relational Being: Beyond Self and Community* (2009), which is a book that represents a new chapter in his thinking.

All of these more "official" matters aside for the moment, I want to acknowledge that Ken is a truly inspiring person, with an extraordinarily lively and imaginative mind, a fierce commitment to the good (though he might be reluctant to use that sort of language!), and an admirable willingness to put in the effort that's necessary to attain it. He's also a friend, with whom I have had the great good fortune in recent years of dining and drinking and sharing ideas at lots of terrific places, generally in celebration of something or other tied to our shared efforts on behalf of the Society for Qualitative Inquiry in Psychology (SQIP). I cherish those times, and I'm extremely grateful for them. As I'll acknowledge in greater detail shortly, there remain issues that divide us. It's been that way from the start. What's amazing is that these differences have never touched our friendship. Indeed, they've sometimes strengthened it. So, he's a *good* friend, and it's my great pleasure and privilege to introduce him today.

Mark Freeman (MF): I have to tell you, I feel like I owe a significant portion of my earlier career to you. And I want to say this in a way that conveys as much feeling as I feel. It's not because I was a student of Ken's, and it's not because I was a devotee of social constructionism. On the contrary, as you (Ken) may recall, I found myself somewhat at odds with some of your work, especially when it came to thorny ideas like objectivity, reality, truth, and so on. There were parts of it I could connect to and internalized and they're still with me. And there were parts of it back then that

I wasn't quite sure what to do with. On some level, I'm still not. That's why I'm looking forward to this interview.

Kenneth Gergen (KG): You can have a therapy session.

MF: A therapy session, exactly. What was great about it is that those initial encounters made me *think*. They made me struggle, and they made me write. They provoked me to work out my own angle on things, and for that I really am especially grateful.

I've always admired your work and the tenacity with which you've pursued it. It's unfailingly thoughtful, provocative, sharp, and significant. But I must tell you, what's drawn me closer to you as a person has been our joint endeavor in recent years working on what's now called the Society for Qualitative Inquiry in Psychology.

So it's great to be here with you.

KG: I feel the same.

MF: Good. So let's begin. I thought it might make sense to begin at the beginning, or close to it. First, what is it that that drew you to the discipline of psychology and what sort of work were you most interested in pursuing at the start? I'll ask you to just keep that one in mind.

The second question has to do with what led up to your landmark 1973 paper, which I'm sure some of you know, called "Social Psychology as History." Generally, I want to know what pointed you in that direction. The next part of this question is a social constructionist question: How did you manage to break out of the particular way you had been constructed as a social psychologist? What is that allowed you to somehow see it from afar, see it anew and move it in a different direction?

KG: You know, every time one asks a question like that—where did it come from, what brought it about—it's in a different context,

and each time you come up with a slightly different account of what has happened to you.

MF: Right.

KG: Let me try only one possibility. Let me go back even to early childhood. And it's not a matter of my mother and father, but a matter of growing up the son of a university professor. My father was a mathematician, and we lived in an academic community—this was at Duke University. That community was settled in the countryside. So, I went to public schools with a lot of rural kids, many from families with little education. My family lived in a sort of academic—well –

MF: Enclave?

KG: Good, a small enclave that the local people called Goon Hollow. So I lived one life at home and quite another one at school. I had to talk in a certain way with a certain accent and have certain values at home, and become a totally different person at school. There I learned to be "Southern." By the time I finished high school, I was really more southern in my lifestyle than academic northeastern. Okay, so I'm living a split life, residing in two opposing worlds. Actually, there were more worlds than that, but this split is the most dramatic.

Then I was accepted at Yale. And I take a confederate flag to Yale, totally déclassé. Now I've got another split, bringing with me a "self" that doesn't fit yet again. And so I must make another transformation of self. So a lot of my life has been involved with finding myself in contexts in which I don't fit. I've had to reformulate and rework the "self" to new contexts.

So these experiences stimulated a lot of reading on the self, even as an undergraduate. For example, I was deeply into Sartre at the time, and when I went to graduate school, I think in a sense it was issues of the self that most concerned me. Also, the fact that what psychology promised at the time was, for one, an open space for creativity. I mean, all the problems hadn't been solved. It wasn't as if all the major theories were there and you were just there to work out the implications. There was great room for flowering.

It also interested me that here was a science which promised to provide answers to major questions of well being, and to do it systematically with research that could be given away to people to create futures in which we could all flourish. It was a terribly optimistic view.

So, here in psychology I could work on these issues of self—who are we, who am I—and do it systematically, with the hope that the society would ultimately benefit. I could proceed with the sense that there was an open space for creativity. I went into social psychology, which is the closest I could come to finding a field where these issues could be explored. I entered a graduate program that was totally empirical, and which became a center or experimental social psychology. There was great optimism in the experimental method; it was the future. Now, why did I abandon this venture?

In fact, when I think about my dissertation (Gergen, 1965) at the time, I was essentially conducting an experimental study showing how in a dialogue, using one could respond to the other in a way that would change the person's personality—at least within that space. At the same time, artificial situations, statistics, graphs and so on. Wonderful, awful stuff.

MF: Did you find that alienating at the time, or was it just sort of part of the furniture of psychology?

KG: You know, it was part of the furniture, but it was worse than that. Because there was a kind of smugness about it that was shared throughout the experimental community. There was a sense of superiority, that you as an experimenter could manipulate the situation and get people to do different things. In retrospect it was exploitative and alienating. But I was a very earnest guy. That was not the way I saw it at the time.

MF: I still find you to be, by the way.

KG: Manipulative or earnest?

MF: Earnest!

KG: All right. So, there were a couple of other things going on at the time. One was Erving Goffman's writings. I was not too happy with the mechanistic model prevalent in the experimental area. Goffman's writings on the presentation of self in everyday life began to offer an alternative. My thesis advisor Edward Jones

> said, "Let's test Goffman's hypotheses." That sounded okay, but it started me thinking: well wait a minute, there's a totally different feeling about Goffman's approach. Goffman paints a picture of a person who's in continuous motion, presenting a self to affect the social world around him, not a picture of a mechanistic person who just responds to stimuli. It's a wholly different world.

So now I'm faced with a dilemma. If I crawl into a world in which everything I do is a performance for others, then a participant's actions in any experiment could be looked at as performances for the experimenter. "Hey, I'm doing this for you in this situation." As experimenters, then, we are not *causing* behavior—controlling independent variables—but simply inviting certain performances. And you can also see that these performances are cultural appropriate. So as experimenters, we are simply swimming about within cultural mores. If that's so, then this whole idea of accumulating knowledge through experimentation begins to wobble. We are not marching into the future, knowing more and more about human behavior. We are simply following the currents of social change.

So I presented some of these ideas to the Society of Experimental Social Psychology, and the editor of the major journal said, "Hey, there is finally something interesting being presented; why don't you write this up?" That became "Social psychology as history." But I've got to say one more thing.

The question is why did I dare? I was really fortunate enough to have a mentor at Duke University, Sigmund Koch, who was a radical critic in a sense, and proud of it. I mean, Koch would take on any theory and move with it, and move against it, shaking up all the assumptions and logics. I really admired him. So there was probably some emulation. I would model Sigmund Koch, and take the risk. Go ahead and do it; put it out there; see what happens. At the same time, the earnest side takes over again. I also thought I was participating in in a tradition of honest reason and exploration. I believed we were in a scholarly discipline and everyone would simply join in a collective search for a rational analysis of our condition. "I don't have all the answers," I would admit, "but here's

a problem for us to chew on. Let's talk about it." But that was totally naïve.

MF: It didn't quite work that way. So, what was the response initially to that piece?

KG: Well, the article became a centerpiece of what was called the "crisis in social psychology." There was a huge, critical reaction, no balanced inquiry at all, and at times it was personal.

MF: But what was the substance of the criticism? Was it that you were anti-experimental or anti-universalist? In other words, what was the big crisis?

KG: You know, that's a good question. I was really rewarded by buying into the experimentalist program, not only in graduate school (where I left already with a half dozen publications), but in managing to get the cream of a crop job at Harvard right out of graduate school. Everyone wanted that position. I was on the National Science Foundation's panels in two years; I had major grants from the National Science and the National Institute of Mental Health; I was on the board of the major journals. I mean, it was tremendous– I was having a very successful career within the guild. So I was a deep insider, and I had plunged a dagger in the heart of friends and colleagues. How could I do that? It was like a Judas within the ranks. So your question is a good one.

I think there was also an existential problem here, because I was part of a tradition that shared a belief in science as a march toward truth, accumulating knowledge over the centuries, and as we contributed our research results to the journals we were making contributions that could ultimately lead to improved life conditions.

I had pulled the rug out from under all that—because I effectively said that what we are doing in these experiments is simply catching culture at a time in history. We are mistakenly looking at culturally and historically embedded actions and treating them as contributions to universal, trans-historical knowledge. The leap from the local to the universal had no warrant. It's like Yale graduate students back in the behaviorist era when

they would look at rats going through a maze and cheer, depending on which theory of human nature the rats confirmed.

But I must admit there was another piece of my argument that stuck the knife in just a little further. I was also arguing that as we do science and create ideas about what people are and what they do, and these ideas are fed back into society they can change the society. They become inputs into the cultural ideas on which people base their actions. So, it's not simply that the science fails to accumulate knowledge; it's actually inviting social change, and simultaneously undermining the generality of previous studies.

MF: Was it your perspective back then that there literally was no room at all for the accumulative project? That is, it was inconceivable to you that there were aspects of social psychology that warranted moving in this universal direction? Or was it that social psychology had sort of underplayed history? How far did you go back then?

KG: Yes, there's an unstated issue I was laboring through at the time, and I would address it differently now. But you might say that the natural sciences did seem to accumulate knowledge, while my argument was aimed primarily at the social sciences. The question then becomes whether we need a different philosophy of science for each. Aesthetically this is not a happy outcome. I was reading a lot of philosophy of science at the time, but I didn't quite know how to solve that problem. If you look into the corners, one might say, perhaps there are some actions that are so deep-seated biologically, that you can't fail to do them, even if you wished to. I should add that I'm currently a big critic of the whole neuro movement (Gergen, 2010a).

MF: I tend to be as well.

KG: That's sort of my current enemy. I sometimes ask my neuro friends, is there any action that people do in an experiment that if you told them not to do it, they would be unable to obey your command? And if they could not change their behavior—even let's say for a lot of money—then you're probably dealing with nature as opposed to culture. If you cut an artery and it bleeds,

you can't simply decide that you don't want to bleed. But if I could stop that bleeding by saying, "I'm not going to bleed anymore," then I'll view the action as culturally fashioned. I mean, that's just a rough cut, but it doesn't leave much left for neuropsychology.

MF: Right. Let's continue a bit beyond that epoch. I want to continue with a question about narrative. My introduction to your work actually didn't come through the 1973 piece; it came several years later. It was my first year of graduate school at the University of Chicago, and I was taking "Concepts in Human Development" with Bernice Neugarten. You'll be glad to know that you were on her syllabus, and this was another crisis paper, but it was one you had written. It was called, "The Emerging Crisis in Lifespan Psychology," (published in 1980) in which you introduced an "aleatoric" perspective on the developmental process emphasizing chance, accident, even randomness. Aleatoric had been a term used by John Cage in talking about musical compositions.

KG: Right.

MF: That was actually the first piece that provoked me to write a rejoinder of sorts; the emphasis on randomness, I had said at the time, was tied to a perspective on development that looked essentially forward in time. Looking backward, though, engaging in narration, led to a quite different sense of things: a story could be told, one that generally hung together more than the aleatoric perspective had suggested to me. So, I want to turn that question into something, again, that's about you and your life and work. Looking backward at the post-1973 trajectory of your life and work—and I know that's a long swath of time—how would you characterize the story at hand? Is there a storyline that you could trace, or is it haphazard? When you look back, is it a series of sort of completely unpredictable shifts? Or is there something that somehow, dare I say, *evolved* in terms of your own intellectual project?

KG: Well, that's kind of a clever question.

MF: Why, thank you.

KG: You are asking me about whether there is an evolution, as if I could give you an earnest answer. But that's not quite fair, because you invited me into a cultural tradition of telling stories. So I cannot answer earnestly about my evolution without undermining the constructionist assumption about narrative construction.

I mean, to tell a good story—one cannot be random, it's not aleatoric. In a good story, one thing causes another, and events move toward some end or goal. That's part of our way of telling stories. So you brought me in and said, "Hey, let's play that tradition." And I've played it for you. Now, is there something to my trajectory, you ask, a real progression? Sure. If I crawl into that story space, I can get totally carried away with its reality. But there are also multiple stories that could be told. I could probably, if you pushed me, tell you the story of the development of an idiot. I mean, why would I shoot myself in the foot by attacking my guild? What sort of pratt would do that? Because I was basically eliminated from the experimental guild. I mean, all my companions pretty much left me. I was essentially booted out, with nowhere to go; I was kind of a Ronan. I subsequently spent time in anthropology and sociology, in Division 32 with the humanists, and so on. I didn't have a home. Only an idiot would want to do that.

And I could also tell it as a funny story, a clown story. So I'm telling a story here of a certain kind, and it makes sense to me because that's part of what storytelling does. It takes a whole lot of things and makes coherent sense of them. Is there a truth in it? Sure, there's a cultural truth in it because I'm using the implements that we do to make truth for us at a given time.

MF: I need to push a little bit.

KG: Okay.

MF: I mean, it seems to me fair to say that, on some level (and I guess this is my own story, my rendition of your intellectual history), one could look at "Social psychology as history" as being a kind of forerunner of what eventually became certain aspects of social

constructionism. It seems to me also that the work that I just cited on this aleatoric perspective also led to the particular version of narrative that you've just voiced. So I'm seeing, I think, some threads? Now indeed, I'm doing the seeing and on some level I suppose one could say I'm creating the story. But there's something *there* in the work that you've done, in the commitments that you've had. And I guess what I want to know is what have been the driving ideas that have characterized this path—however you want to tell the story? If you had to identify the pivotal chapters in Ken Gergen's life and work—and I'm not asking you to name them (I'd originally asked him to do that; he didn't like it!)—what would they be?

KG: Well, we have several issues at stake here.

MF: It's true,

KG: I'm not real fond of "basic drive" questions, as if somehow I could look into the core of my being and discover the well-spring of my actions. So let me take another part of your question that I found interesting.

MF: Sure.

KG: If you take some of the arguments that were in that early paper on social psychology as history, I think you can indeed find assumptions that if you nudge them a bit will lead to social construction. Once I make the argument about what I called "enlightenment effects," that is, scientists can change society by sharing their truths about who we are, I am close to constructionism. It's saying that if I share a discourse with others—my constructions of the world -and they join in this discourse, new forms of life may emerge. This is a center idea for constructionists. For example, if I as psychiatrist inform the society about the nature of "mental illness," and people accept this as true, they may begin to construct themselves in these terms. When faced with problems, they may say, "Oh, it must be depression, or I must be bipolar," and they begin to seek out therapists (Gergen, 2005). Herein lies an entire line of constructionist critique. So right there, you have in that early paper a line of argument central to later constructionist work.

This line of thought becomes much more thoroughly developed with time. Along with a host of scholars in the social studies of science, the history of science, and the sociology of knowledge, for example, one can begin to see constructionism as a theory of knowledge. And, as I have tried to argue, as a theory of knowledge there are enormous advantages over the positivist/empiricist fundamentalism that has so stunted the potentials of the social sciences in the twentieth century (Gergen, 1994b). In constructionism we have as well, a theory of knowledge that makes no attempt to declare itself as true. It shifts out sites from looking at science not in terms of its truth-telling capacities but in its pragmatic contribution to society.

Let me expand here a little in light of a question often addressed to me. "Aren't some descriptions of human action simply more accurate than others?" This seems obvious, doesn't it? For example, cultural anthropology does seem to make truth claims, and to do so in hermeneutic or interpretative ways with which I have an affinity. I have even used some of these claims to support various constructionist arguments—for example on the cultural construction of emotion. Yet, at base, I would not wish to make any claims as to the comparative accuracy of competing accounts of culture.

Even in many corners of cultural anthropology, particularly critical anthropology, they more or less understand that whenever you study a culture you are coming to it with your own language and you are going to thresh your observations through your language. Whatever you take back to the home culture is going to carry a tradition of that language. Your description is not a reflection of what there is, but a creation of what there is in your terms. So I don't look at is as objective, but as a construction of the other. To be sure, one can be more or less correct, but only within a shared perspective.

In my recent writing I have been trying to make a strong case for what I call *reflective pragmatism* (Gergen, 2015e). Let's not accept any truth claim as true in all worlds. There are no grounds for making such a claim. You're always working in a specific language, with specific traditions, assumptions, and so on. But pragmatically, such languages and assumptions may be useful (or not). So yes, you could have an ethnography that would be true for us, because that is what we call XYZ in our culture. Given our

cultural agreements, I can also go and see if your report is accurate. They have mating rituals, we might say, because that's what we call those patterns of behavior. And yes, all of us who talk about mating rituals can see them immediately. But that doesn't make such an account true or accurate; it just makes it useful for us in talking about them. Now, the question becomes a matter of reflective pragmatics. Why do we want to say that about them? What hangs on this account, and what are the ideological, political, cultural implications of describing their actions as mating rituals? Why don't we call them love affairs, for example, as opposed to mating rituals? Why construct them in this way as opposed to another? What are the values that are carried in our characterizations? For whom are these characterizations useful, and for what purposes? Who may be harmed? These are the sorts of deliberations invited by a reflective pragmatism.

But now let me return to your earlier question about social psychology as history and its implications for later work. I need to add that the critiques of that paper also stimulated new lines of thought. And some of these new lines became central to later ideas in constructionism. What emerges next in your own dialogue may very well depend on what questions people raise.

MF: Sure. Sure.

KG: I'll give you one important example. The early, and most powerful critique of my arguments essentially said that I was right about historical changes in patterns of social action. These, however, were only superficial. But we as scientists are not interested in superficial change; we are after something deeper, let's say the basic or fundamental processes of cognition, motivation, and so on.

An interesting critique. But then, for me, the question comes up: how can you tap into these fundamentals? How can you infer from the surface behavior—which I'm going to call cultural—that a "fundamental process" has been at work? How would you identify the process? Now, this is where it's going to become interesting for you, because this is also the hermeneutic question. How do I know from your words what

private meanings they express? How do I take the narrative account and know what underlying meaning it represents? How do I access your subjectivity? And if you can't answer that question—and nobody can—then why do we presume there are processes, meanings, motives and so on that determine the "surface" of our actions? Hermeneutic theory has wrestled with this question for centuries, with no compelling answer. If you can't answer the question about how one can make a valid interpretation, then what are we doing when we say we understand another's subjectivity? What are we doing when we say I have empathy for that person? Can we make sense of the project that links understanding to our ability to somehow penetrate behind the eyeballs of the other?

As I said, I don't think the hermeneutic question is answerable in principle. And this impasse led me ultimately down the path of post-structuralism (Gergen, 1988). I lost interest in theorizing or researching the structures *behind* the actions. Let's engage with the actions in motion. Now, we could go on with that if you want.

MF: I guess I would question your characterization of the hermeneutic project as you've just articulated it.

KG: Yes, you can do that.

MF: If I'm trying to understand the other, I don't know that the aim is to somehow "reach behind." I don't know that it's an inferential process where the goal is to somehow be able to discern the other's subjectivity . . .

KG: I'm not sure, either.

MF: What I need to do is I need to learn how to be a reader of sorts. And I need to be able, to the extent that I can, to be conscious of my prejudices and to bracket them where it's possible so as to let this other being, text, speaking person, dying person, whatever, be there in her difference, or his difference. So, I think there are certain aspects of construing the hermeneutic project that are themselves fraught, and the way you've represented it, I agree, is problematic.

KG: Yeah, and you know, we could go on with that issue and it might be fun. But you sort of leave off with the Gadamer dilemma of moving beyond my own horizons to some kind of fusion. I find

that very romantic. I mean, it's kind of a metaphoric space of mystery. But, if you suspend all your forestructures of understanding, it seems to me you wouldn't have the capacity to understand anything. You're just a blank slate without comprehension.

MF: Sure. I don't think that's where Gadamer's at, but we shouldn't pursue that too much. What needs to happen for Gadamer is that I need to at least have the ability to have my own prejudices or forestructures *displaced* to some degree. That doesn't mean erasure; it doesn't mean I can encounter the world with a blank slate. It means I have to be open enough to the otherness at hand that what I brought to that encounter initially can be corrected. But let me turn this into a question, and it has to do with the very nature of this conference. The idea of the other, psychology and the other. To what extent do you connect to that language? And to what extent not?

KG: Well, let me first of all say that I approach this question from a constructionist standpoint. So I understand that the discourse of psychology and the other comes out of our traditions. We inherit that language. And even if it's a constructed language, I live with it in the same way you do. Just because the discourse does not represent the world as it is, doesn't mean we should abandon it. I should add that from a constructionist perspective difference does not mean division. There are many scholars in this room who differ with me in important respects—even you yourself. However, because I understand that we are all working with constructed worlds—held tenuously together by a "mobile army of metaphors," as Nietzsche would say—there is no sword of truth that will ultimately eliminate the wrong-headed. Difference does not mean the other is "wrong," and thus somehow second-rate or dismissible. Rather, we learn from those who differ; we see other moves in discourse, other values in action; new spaces are opened for relating.

So, returning to the self, I live within the common traditions, but I'm not content to stay there. Because look at what you've done with your question. In the very construction of self and other, you've

already created an ontological gap. There's "me" here trying to understand "you" there, each of us living in our own subjectivity. I don't know how to actually open my private world to you; and I don't know when and how your subjectivity is being expressed. So what you've done is to create an ontological gap where there will always be this problem of self and other, and how one subjectivity can ever understand the other. You've created a world of difference, of social atoms. Going back to Democritus, our language creates a world of independent entities.

Now, that's okay but look with all the problems that you create when you put that discourse into play; look at what happens to us:

> "I live in my world, and you live in your world. You are fundamentally separate from me. I don't ever quite understand you. I'll never know quite what you're feeling or thinking. And if we are each independent, I have to take care of myself, don't I? Isn't that the point of life? That's all I can really know. Isn't everyone else taking care of themselves?"

I'm now playing here, but you can see the implications. Our sciences repeat this vision. Here is Freud and the pleasure principle, with the Id searching fundamentally for its own pleasure, and here is reinforcement theory, telling us that fundamentally we are organisms seeking to get the most for the least. It's there as well in microeconomic theory, and in sociobiology with the selfish gene, and so on and so on. You are familiar with Ed Sampson's early critique of self-contained individualism. Well it's the entire individualist ideology that falls out of that atomistic view of individual, private, and separate selves.

Relationships on that account are not fundamental. Rather, you *build* relationships. You have a relationship between two independent beings. Now, that's okay up to a point; it's what we inherit. But I say from a constructionist standpoint, yes, we can live in that language, but we don't have to remain there. What if there were another way of looking at what is fundamental, not you there and me here, but as relational process. If we could see relational process as fundamental, then anything we say about independent selves or psychological process or subjectivities comes out of that relational process (Gergen, 2009). So relational process is the origin,

the Ursprung, of all meaning and that meaning includes words like "self" and "other."

If we could develop a discourse of relational process, wouldn't it have more promising ideological, political, and cultural implications; wouldn't it open up new spaces of being? Can I take that one more step?

MF: Sure.

KG: You see, I have some problems with this conference in that respect. But let me take it a little bit further. I mean, there are a lot of books on Levinas, and actually you have done some work on Levinas yourself. But who is the blessed person in that story? Who in the story about accepting the face of the other, being displaced by the other, listening to the other, or embracing the other, is the hero? It's not the other, but the self. "Hey, I accept you." "Hey, I am compassionate." "Hey, I am Jesus Christ, I love everybody." I mean, it's not the person who receives the compassion, the nurturance, the acceptance, or the love who is blessed. The other is faceless in some sense.

MF: [Gasp]

KG: Yeah, I have gone too far in saying faceless. But in this story others are ultimately a means to end of self-fulfillment. "I am moral!" Now, that's a critique, and I'm not saying I would pursue it everywhere all the time. But given this kind of critique—emphasizing self as opposed to other—what if the ethic were built around relational process? Can we ultimately be responsible to a process from which all meaning and all possibility of morality of any kind emerges?

MF: Here I'll be a pluralist. There are plenty of things I might say in response to that characterization. But I really do want to be pluralistic. I also want to affirm the relational. I mean, I don't think it's possible to talk about the other, even in a Levinasian sense, without it being relational through and through. So about that, we're of a piece. But I wonder whether or not you're putting aside the idea of the other maybe a bit too quickly? And I wonder whether there might be –

KG: I think about ten years.

MF: Hmm?

KG: No, but I think about ten years too soon.

MF: Why not say that there are situations in which the language of relationality and relation building really is primary? I know some of the good work that you do at Taos and other places where that language is completely fitting. And I can also think of other situations, some of which I've written about when I go to see my mother, a 92-year old woman with dementia. It's not heroic caregiver stuff. But I like to think it's not about me. It's about her and what it is that she draws forth from me. So in that context, the relational language doesn't do for me what the language of the other does. Is it possible for us to say let's figure out where these languages best work and where they don't?

KG: Yes, absolutely, that seems just right. Again, I don't want the traditional language of self/other to disappear, and it's possible that that kind of language works very well under certain kinds of conditions, in the same way that a scientific language could work in other conditions. For example, you could say "I'm going to see my mother to give her certain kind of treatments with music, which may bring her back to some kind of communication." And within that sphere of construction, you could do it objectively, even measuring the effects of your treatment. So, what I'm after is not to displace our history; it's to add a whole new way of orienting ourselves, opening up new kinds of spaces to think through our lives and institutions.

Here, for example, if we thought of what you're doing as nurturing a relationship or a relational process, I wonder if your actions would change their form? I should add that I have been criticized in my relational theorizing for eliminating human agency. And within relational theory this is indeed the case. However, it's important to realize here that the concept of agency gains its meaning largely by contrast with the concept of determinism. So if you bracket agency, you've also eliminated determinism. The terms feed off each other in their definitions. What I am trying to do in relational theory is take the entire determinism/agency bifurcation, and saying, "Okay, these are discursive

traditions. We don't have to fight out whether people are truly agents or determined; these are just two ways of talking, two ways of interpreting. Each has some utility." But what if we bracket the binary, and explore a way of explaining human action that sees it as emerging from within relational process. And of course, you could say that at any point in the process one can "choose not to participate." But let us not look at this "choosing" as an exercise in agency. Choice emerges from the relational process (Gergen, 2009).

Now, one can still counter, that I do remain with an ontology of individual, embodied beings. And there is a way in which this is correct. The very language we employ to create theory demands entification, that is, a world of separate entities. We could scarcely create a theory about human action that did not use nouns and pronouns. Thus, you might say, the attempt is to create a theory of dance, but without separating the dancers from the dance. Now, I can separate out analytically each person's movement. But that movement by itself makes no sense at all. You can't tango alone. It's the dance that counts. Consider what we're doing right now—if you took the words alone, they would make no sense; they make no sense without what you have said. My words are nonsense outside of what you've said and vice versa.

What I suggest in my 2009 book, *Relational Being*, is that we look at our bodies as carrying an enormous array of resources. For example, the language I'm using. I didn't make it up; it doesn't come from an "in here;" it comes from dialogue; it emerges from a relational process. My posture, what I'm wearing . . . it's all emerging from relationships. At the same time, there are only some of these relationships represented in what I'm doing here right now. So, I always have the possibility of shifting from one form of action or performance to another—playing with you, criticizing you, and so on. And I don't want to create a sort of a super-consciousness that selects which performance will emerge. What I want to say, is that we can participate in different kinds of dances with one another, and one or another dance movement will emerge as it becomes salient to the unfolding relationship at the moment. So that if you ask me a question, for example, I'll try to give you an answer, because that's just what we do in our culture. I don't have to answer, but it's so well embedded in our tradition that I'll probably do that. Unless you ask me

a question that I don't understand, for example, then I'll say, "Well, tell me more." Or, if the question was curious, I might say, "Why are you asking that question? What hangs on that question for you," or something like that. So I have available many possibilities other than answering the question, but they all come out of our traditions. I don't so much select one freely, as move within the limited space of what is available in the particular relationship.

MF: Right; for sure. Let's continue. I want to ask one more set of questions related to the ideas that we've been considering. Returning to the term "construction," it seems to me that in recent years you've taken that idea in a somewhat different direction. If I look back at your earlier work, a lot of your concerns were epistemological; they were about questioning realism and objectivism, that sort of thing. But much of your work now is about building a better world. I'm thinking especially of the work that you and Mary are doing in terms of the newsletter, the Taos Institute, and so on. You've identified your work as being part of a "future forming" project (Gergen, 2015a). Can you talk a little bit about that?

I do have to ask you one more loaded question too; it's a friendly one. A number of years ago, when I began to see you moving in this direction, I actually suggested to you that there seemed to be almost a *theological* dimension to some of what you were doing. And, in fact, there I saw the title to chapter 12 in your excellent book *Relational Being* called "Approaching the Sacred." What's happening? And what *is* sacred?

KG: That's a lot of lovely questions. All right, let me just touch on a couple of things. For one, that epistemological battle between empiricism or realism and constructionism was of major importance to me for about ten years, at least. Many fights, a lot of scars. I've got Karl Popper saying, "You are the enemy." Things like that.

MF: Do you remember when Louis (Sass) and I were on a panel together, it was called "Postmodernism and its Malcontents"?

KG: Exactly.

MF: We were the malcontents and you were the discussant! It was good, clean fun, but nonetheless. . . . But go ahead.

KG: But at some point—and I think Mary's the pivotal person here—she says, "Are you going to continue to fight those battles forever?" And she was right. Why do you want to stay in that space? You know practically everything you're going to say and it's just a matter of trying to point out the shortcomings of the competition.

MF: Right, it's a finite project.

KG: It's also finite in the same sense of critical studies, which came out of much the same context. I mean, critical studies are filled with constructionism, critical psychology being a case in point. It's a finite orientation. You deconstruct all the essentialisms—and it's emancipatory. But then what?

So deconstruction emancipates us from traditions, and that's fine. But why not, to go back to the constructionist premise, use language to create something. Construct worlds that create the future, not just emancipate? Why not construct in order to activate? Here I'm being instructed by some friends in a management school who developed a dialogic practice called appreciative inquiry. For example, they're consultants and they are faced with organizations in conflict. But, rather than going in and studying the conflict and telling them what to do, they go in and set in motion a dialogue about what they value. "What's important to us? What do we care about?" That dialogue brings people together in a more productive way—and then they build on the dialogue. They base the practice on constructionist ideas. As they propose, problem talk is only a form of construction, and it doesn't get us very far. The problems become increasingly apparent. Let's begin to talk about common visions and values. Now we have positive transformation.

That was illuminating to me because then you could approach constructionist ideas with the attempt to explore practices that would accomplish something in society. Where do the ideas lead? Now, that's part of the basis of the Taos Institute, which tries to bring

theory—mostly constructionist theory—together with practices in therapy, education, peace building and so on. As we often ask, how can we use these ideas to create the future? If we talk together, if we find ways of collaborating, if we find the right mode of dialogue, things can happen, we can bring about change. But this change—and again—this is the relational part, has to be lodged in relational process.

MF: I really do admire that dimension of your project. I have to ask you a question, though, in this context, and I'm not sure what you'll make of it. But what kind of future? I realize that whatever future is built needs to come out of dialogue with people and needs to come out of relation and so on. But I'm sure you would agree that not every future is worth having, that there are some that are perhaps more worth having, and so on. I'm not asking for an absolute or anything of that sort. But what would you say are the sorts of values, aims, purposes, that really support this work? You just mentioned the idea of peacebuilding. What else? How articulated is the vision? Or is it something that's ever on the move?

KG: Let me add a little bit of a footnote to an earlier question, and then move on to this issue. Theology: what do I do about that, you asked? Why that chapter in *Relational Being*?

MF: I like it, by the way.

KG: Oh, great.

MF: And lots of your other work, too.

KG: You are kind. Well, first of all, I have a lot of friends who really have a strong sacred sensibility. Surely that's a constructed world, but every construction may have something it does for us. And for many people the discourse of the sacred has profound consequences. You don't abandon a worldview because it's a construction, because every intelligibility creates something of value for us together. So then I say, well, let's take for example the auratic quality of that discourse—the aura that pervades the discourse of the sacred, and ask ourselves how it can be linked to relational process. Could we speak of relational being in such a way that it acquires a sacred dimension? And can we move away

from the conception of a sky God, to prizing forms of relational practice such that we could speak of the sacred dimension of our every-day actions?

MF: But what makes it sacred?

KG: Nothing *makes* anything sacred.

MF: Is love part of this or is that too loaded?

KG: Again, it would depend on what you want to bring into the account. You have to watch very carefully what you're going to objectify. I tend not to want to do the love thing because that word is so dispersed and with so many meanings, and so many look at love as a panacea for everything. "If we could only love one another, everything would be great." You know, we've been through that for about, what–

MF: A long time.

KG: Twenty centuries and we still don't love each other.

MF: I'm not wedded to that particular term. I'm asking you, though, because it seems to me that you're not only committed to relations, but to relations of a specific sort—those that grow people and bring them closer together versus those that don't. I'm trying to figure out in a certain sense where the directives, implicit though they may be, come from.

KG: Okay. But realize I'm not universalizing it. There is a stance that I kind of live with from day to day and I don't know whether it'll be there forever, or under all circumstances. But what I'm trying to place the greatest value on is the well-being of the relational process itself. The process may both unite and divide us, but it's the process that is important. Once you have divided communities, the process is severed or eliminated.

So I've been working with an idea of first and second order values. First order values are always in motion, being created among us in every situation. As we begin to talk together, we're either sustaining some value tradition or creating locally. So that process is always under way. But when these first order moralities become concretized and universalized and become what we call fundamental values, then you're in trouble. Then you begin to draw a circle around who is good and who

is not good, and those who aren't in the circle of the good are "treated," or put in prison, or eliminated.

So, you need a second order value, which brings those differences together, a second order ethic that is played out in practice, not in theory. The ethic gains its momentum and meaning from practice, how you do it. Part of this is also a critique of the theoretical project, in which so many of us are involved. We have somehow hoped we could solve issues of value theoretically. And so we have interminable books and articles on philosophic and conceptual issues of ethics. I've done that for a long time.

But, you know, that's a Cartesian vision, that you could somehow set everything aright in some rational fashion. I don't buy that anymore. I think what you've got to do is work with the relational patterns in which we are all engaged. How to do it? How we can move past the adoration of love as an abstract value, for example, and learn how to have loving relationships? What do you say, what do I say, what do we do in actually carrying it out? So I'm very interested in the actions essential to creating and sustaining relationships.

MF: I guess what I would want to ask here, again, is: why not move in a more pluralistic direction? I want to just make quick contact with something I read in the pieces that you sent. In the world-making piece, you ask: What if, "rather than searching for the determinants of depression inquiry, we're launched into means of escaping or avoiding [it]?" What if, "rather than revealing the suffering experience of immigrants, inquiry is directed toward advancing immigrant well being?" And so on. So this is your idea of future forming. But the question I have is, why couch it as a "rather"? In other words, wouldn't it seem important to know something about the possible sources of depression in order to figure out what you're going to do about it? Wouldn't it be valuable to know something about the nature of immigrant suffering in order to spell out what well being might be? So it's not so much a plea for theory, but I get the sense sometimes that you want to jettison that whole what-is project and replace it with something else. I wonder about the replacement idea.

KG: Yeah. You know, I'm always overstating everything partly to make a point.

MF: It works!

KG: Because otherwise, we can just play around the edges forever. I guess it's trying to put a stake in the ground and saying, "Okay, what are we going to do about that?" So, the essay on future forming—which won a prize last year for social science essays –

MF: It's a good essay.

KG: It was trying first to point to the way our research tradition documents everything (Gergen, 2015a). That's what we do. Based on an ocular metaphor, research is about documenting what is the case and putting it into articles that fill up journals that no one reads. It only becomes worse and worse because of demands for more and more publications. Thus you read little, except for locating references needed for your next article.

So you've got thousands of articles coming out of the social sciences that have almost no impact on the society. It's almost useless. That's overstating it, but I could defend it up to a point. What are we doing with our lives, writing in ways no one can read in any case? Only our colleagues can read it, if they must. This is one reason Mary and I often turn to performative social science.

MF: I know. I was always surprised when my parents couldn't read my stuff. I thought it was so accessible.

KG: Yeah. So why do we write in this awful language? And why do we treat others as objects for study? What is that all about? What is this whole notion of "the other" that I am going to study? I am going to document you; I am going to get your narratives and a publication from that. I have problems with the whole process. Again, I don't want to jettison anything, but I do have problems with it.

So then I say, why not shift our challenge from this tradition of documenting with that of creating the future. For example, rather than research attempting to document our understanding of depression—

which we've been fruitlessly doing now for almost a century—why not work on ways to create change. Let's say, we've got a person who's feeling pretty punky and suicidal. How can we talk to that person? What kind of dialogue could we have? Let's establish a relationship with the person, try things out. How did you do it, then, and what kind of relationship did you have? What happened here, and how did it work out there? We could help each other create futures. The point is not to write yet another paper, but to create new and potentially valuable forms of practice.

MF: Well, here's a question that I hadn't anticipated asking—and it's not one I'm unsympathetic to, mind you. Are you essentially calling for the end of social science?

KG: Just one point here. Natural science gains its esteem–

MF: Credibility.

KG: Because of what it produced, whether the electric light, the atomic bomb, a cure for typhoid fever, or whatever. No one gives a whit or even understand the theories—the truth posits. What those sciences do, what makes them culturally significant, is their contribution to people in terms of their everyday lives. So the question is, what have the social sciences contributed? People don't need, for example a thousand new journal articles. What have these contributed to people's lives?

MF: I'm with you.

KG: What they do need are new practices of how to love.

MF: All right.

KG: So, that—I don't want to give up the tradition, I just want to shift the focus to forming the future as opposed to documenting a past that rapidly disappears.

MF: I'm not sure how much time we have; I hope we have time for one or two other questions. A quick comment on the Society for Qualitative Research in Psychology.

KG: Okay.

MF: Why were you as invested in it as you were? As you are?

KG: As I am.

MF: Which we're all glad for.

KG: Qualitative research in psychology– we spent seven years working to get qualitative research recognized by the American Psychological Association as legitimate, as something worth doing. Yet, I don't do qualitative research.

MF: For the most part, I don't, either.

KG: I mean, Mary and I do performance work, whether you call that research or not. We do. But for the most part, you know, I champion the qualitative movement because it represents a pluralism (Gergen and Gergen, 2012). All those practices included in the qualitative movement come out of different traditions. Phenomenology comes out of a different tradition than most of narrative studies, and that differs in basic assumptions from discourse analysis, which can also be contrasted with action research, and so on. They each have theories, assumptions, values, perspectives, constructions, that together enrich the field enormously. They open a space for an enormous range of activity outside of testing hypothesis. Look at all the things we can do. For me, that kind of enrichment was first of all significant.

But you might say that more privately, the pluralism is also a constructionist venture. If we appreciate that there are many different paradigms, each with its own potentials, each offering potentially valuable resources, that's an implicit constructionist orientation to knowledge. So, the movement really becomes important in terms of what I think are the ideological political consequences of a constructionist perspective.

MF: All right, good. There's so much more we could talk about in that context. And again, let me just reiterate what a rich and important collaboration that's been. The final question I'll ask before we open it up just has to do with . . . it's probably not the kind of question you like . . . but the Ken Gergen legacy. I know, I know. But, I must say, I did get the sense through the work on SQIP that that's part of it, that there are certain things that you want to leave to our discipline, which I know you still see as fraught and troubled, to some extent. So if you could just say a few words about what it is you'd like to leave the discipline with?

KG: Okay. The problem is that I *alone* don't lead the discipline with anything –

MF: Of course.

KG: Whatever I've done has been part of a group of people who talk and support and help each other.

MF: Absolutely.

KG: So I don't make any claim to any of that. I look at social construction not as mine, for example, but an international dialogue on the nature of truth, objectivity and so on. I'm a part of it, I articulate it in a certain way, but it's, you know, it's not my legacy.

Relational theory is a major step for me in terms of intellectual work. But again, I'm part of the poststructuralist dialogues, not very far from the core of that work. The Taos Institute: I've been very much involved with the development of this institute, which now has 500 associates in 38 countries doing practical things.

MF: That's amazing.

KG: Like changing the Chinese school system, things like that. I mean, for me these are like flowers. All these people making all these fascinating changes.

MF: It's beautiful. And Mary, again, has been a big part of that, I know.

KG: Yes, a big part of it. But with other colleagues as well.

MF: Of course, of course.

KG: The Society for Qualitative Inquiry, to which your contribution was enormous. Yes. *Theory in Psychology,* the journal, was launched with some other friends. The same for *Qualitative Psychology*. I also helped to launch a network on dialogue in Latin America. I mean, it's like you help projects to develop. You're part of them, but it's not your own legacy; it's sort of a legacy of *with*.

MF: Great. Did we miss anything that we ought to have talked about?

KG: Without doubt.

MF: There's plenty more, but let's stop here.

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