

Book Review

STUDIES IN MEANING 4: CONSTRUCTIVIST PERSPECTIVES ON THEORY, PRACTICE, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Jonathan D. Raskin, Sara K. Bridges, and Robert A. Neimeyer (Eds.)

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Reviewed by

Bill Warren

University of Newcastle, Australia

This volume, like its predecessors (Raskin and Bridges, 2002, 2004, 2008) offers a rich lode of ideas that can be mined by explorers in search of many different types of bounty. Structurally, a brief Preface introduces fourteen (14) contributions organized under four Parts going, in order, to *Theory, Practice, Social Justice*, and *Theory Revisited*. The contributions range from quite brief (six pages) to substantial length (forty-two pages), with authors both well-known in the field and less well known. As to content, the different papers discuss a wide variety of ideas and issues that in one way or another are likely to be of interest to constructivist thinking. A brief survey of this content with comment by way of my reaction constitutes this Review, as follows.

Von Glasersfeld (p. 3-8) opens the Volume by briefly outlining the radical constructivist view of meaning and the consequent problem of understanding how communication is possible at all from that perspective. He raises three questions in the face of the radical constructivist view of the individual (or, in his paper, the “individual language user”) as only ever able to work with subjective constructs that are “ideas of the imagination”. That is, ‘ideas’ or ‘conceptions’ as captured in what he explains is a more correct rendering, as per Wittgenstein, of the German word *Vorstellung*. This is in contrast to a view that these constructs refer to ‘things’ having,

ostensibly, independent objective existence ‘in the world’, and where communication between people is relatively unproblematic. His three questions are: where do these ‘items of the imagination’ come from?; if they are (merely) subjective constructs, how, then, could communication be possible at all?; and, who are the “others” from whom or through whom we learn those constructs?. There are some traditional issues here in terms, for example, of the philosophy of mind and the problems of Solipsism (which, arguably in my view, is impossible to refute, logically, anyway, and takes us nowhere – whoever ‘us’ is!), and in terms of discussions within Existentialist philosophy of the previous century. Von Glasersfeld is obviously aware of these issues, but the reader interested in the deeper discussion they invite is redirected to fuller treatments in other of his writings or the writing of others. *Gergen’s* paper (p. 9-25) reiterates the view that meaning can only occur in relationship, a view that has its well known origins in the “dialogues on the social construction of knowledge”, to which Gergen himself has been a most significant contributor. These two papers are useful ‘scene setters’ and provide a ‘platform’ for the volume and it is true as the Editors say, that the themes they raise resonate, overtly or covertly, in the rest of the volume. That said, perhaps a ‘direct addressing’ by other papers

might have been interesting rather than a mere 'resonance'. That is, a brief comment in each other paper on the relationship of the ideas of that paper, to these first two papers; and, perhaps, Von Glasersfeld and Gergen's comments on the other dozen papers. Still, there is perhaps no shortage of critical discussion of those themes in the more general literature both within and outside constructivist thinking, and my suggestion, thus, superfluous. Equally, it would make for a much more complex production and impose significant work.

In the context of Gergen's paper, in particular, but equally, if less pointedly, in relation to Von Glasersfeld's, two papers which immediately follow their contributions are both interesting and problematic in terms of the very matters raised in their opening contributions, and in terms of my suggestion about 'direct addressing'. One commences with a discussion of the centrality of 'unique outcomes' in therapy (Goncalves *et al*; p.29-64); yet, with Part I in one's head, what is 'unique' if all is caused or conditioned or determined by social factors or forces (whatever these might turn out to be)? The other (Neimeyer, p. 65-91) takes us through the 'private story' of those who grieve; yet, again, what is 'private' in terms of the same constructionist argument, and how can we really know it or share it if it is merely and, importantly, always, only and ever 'private' and 'subjective'?. These points aside, *Goncalves et al* outline their research programme grounded in narrative therapy, which attempts to access these outcomes, defined as "all the details *that fall outside the domain of the dominant narrative*, namely episodes in which the person did, thought, imagined or felt something different, or related to others in a new way, from what the problematic narrative 'prescribes' for his or her life" (p. 29, my italics). Their research programme develops a coding system for systematically studying change processes in therapy (essentially, but also outside of therapy), using a notion of "innovative moments" (*i-moments*) as a theoretical advance on that of 'unique outcomes' in therapy. Five different types of *i-moments* are identified as emerging in therapy (action, reflection, protest, reconceptualisation, and performing change) and the coding takes account of the *temporal salience* of each (where it occurred in a session)

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and its *origin* (e.g. the therapist or client). This is a most interesting paper with the fuller implications for practice to be worked out, but of significant interest and import for those interested in the micro-processes of therapy, and the micro-skills of it. *Robert Neimeyer's* discussion of *grief* illuminates the 'private story' his client was sharing with him in therapy. He argues that it is the "movement from symptoms to significance that a constructivist orientation to bereavement takes its central concern" and he goes on to discuss the theoretical, empirical and therapeutic implications of this with his customary precision. His conclusion concerning therapy introduces a metaphor related to a jazz improvisation, where "each 'performance' of therapy is unique as ... participants 'riff' off the offerings of the other(s)" (p. 87). This metaphor, for me, highlights the gaps and spaces for a bridge or a *rapprochement* between the 'socially constructed', the personally constructed, and the 'radically individually constructed' of life. Here, in relation to such a *rapprochement*, I was reminded of the notion of *Praxis*, highlighted in modern times by Marx but developed more specifically by Paulo Freire. This appears a useful way to engage the apparent tensions between Existentialist and Marxist traditions which provide important elements in the genealogy of personal constructivism and social constructionism, respectively? (This has been discussed elsewhere: Warren, 2002). To harp on my earlier point, would it not be interesting for Goncalves *et al* and Neimeyer to conclude with a comment on their own thinking after having read Von Glasersfeld's and Gergen's papers, or *vice versa*?

Papers on *love* and on *deconstruction* within counseling conclude Part II. *Hermans-Konopka and Hermans* (p. p. 93-123) discuss the transformative features of love and their work on developing a more dynamic conceptualization of feelings that will allow love's transformative features to be better understood; thereby, in turn, for the concept of love itself to be better understood in its wider complexity. While from this last observation it might be thought that this is a theoretical paper, in fact it is an empirical one describing an interesting study of the capacity of love to provoke change in self-experience. Of a number of feeling words (loneliness, anxiety, guilt, love etc.) taken from the *Self Confronta-*

tion Method (Hermans, 1986 – reference not in Reference list), applied to situations which evoked particular emotional experiences that went to a sense of self and to a tendency to act (to do something), it was *love* that provoked the broadest and most positive change in self-experience and in motivation to do something. My observations here unlikely do justice to the study but it is a most interesting one, self-styled as a “first step’ in a dialogical conceptualization of love”; as such, and in terms of its general discussion of love as well, it has good claim to being also a substantive theoretical contribution that can also be usefully read in the context of Gergen’s contribution. Finally, *Strong and Schultz* (p. 125-153) discuss “‘deconstructivist’ counseling”, canvassing some theoretical and historical matters before describing a research study in which video-taped, one-hour consultations were closely analyzed using discourse analysis to detect where “deconstruction questions” were asked or attempted between counselors [with graduate training and supervision in social constructionist approaches to counseling] and ‘clients’” (p. 133). This is a good, practical demonstration of, again, some micro-aspects of counseling and similar relationships, and it well shows the understanding the author’s have of deconstructive conversations as being “about locating one’s understandings in others’ words and discourses that can never ultimately capture experience” (p. 146). Again, the platform established by the first two papers in Part I emerges as a good and provocative one.

Part III, the largest section with five (5) papers, is somewhat different. It takes the reader into a topic that ought to be warmly welcomed into the constructivist *oeuvre*; at least I welcome it. The controversy surrounding whether psychologists should work in such areas as the interrogation of terrorist suspects and/or such places as Guantanamo Bay raised wider questions for Psychology and Psychologists that have touched constructivist psychology but slightly. It was Koocher (2007) who exposed for me most dramatically the ethical questions that challenged Professional Societies and sped up considerations of the idea that social justice and related notions inescapably impacted our practice. North American Psychologists will be aware of the agonising that went on in the profession con-

cerning psychology and interrogation conducted at Guantanamo Bay. In this Part III are discussions concerning: therapeutic work “alongside” (an interesting and important expression) survivors of torture and political violence (*Reynolds*, 157-184); mentoring as a rich concept with ethical dimensions and how the richness and ethical aspects are well met in constructivist mentoring (*Bridges*, 185-204); the ‘objectification’ of women and its individual-psychological consequences, but, equally importantly – and equally objectionably – as preserving power differentials and inequalities (*Hill*, 205-226); George Kelly’s assumption that the universe is integral and interconnected and the significance of this view for how we understand psychopathology and how we might respond to it in a way that accepts and has an important place for notions of transpersonal responsibility, reverence for humanity and for other living things and the ‘living system’, as well as for the cultures of others (*Leitner*, 227-246); and a courageous discussion challenging social justice counseling in terms of five (5) criticisms: its espousal of naïve realism, its lack of theoretical elaboration, its (righteous) imposition of values, its ‘brimming with hubris’, and the fact that it goes beyond its range of convenience (*Raskin*, p. 247-276).

The papers in Part III are quite varied and illustrate the wide range of issues that discussion in this field can throw-up. They are all quite good papers in both content and writing, and while not wishing to single any one out for special attention I was most struck by Vikki Reynolds paper which opens this Part, and Leitner’s broadening of our reflections. Her identification of her therapeutic engagement with survivors of torture as *witnessing* struck a strong chord. I think that that chord concerned her identification of *witnessing* as speaking to a “particular ethical stance, rather than a prescribed set of tools or techniques” (p. 161), but also because her idea here generates reflection on therapeutic work more generally. Different, yet related, is Leitner’s sensitive discussion of our interconnectedness with a wider reality than the merely ‘social’ – the cosmos, no less – and the ethical as well as psychological dimensions of this. Thus, given Reynolds and Leitner did I find Jon Raskin’s paper a little puzzling generally; particularly his fifth criticism, that is, that the ‘range of conveni-

ence' of social justice counseling is exceeded. This is an interesting paper with obviously more in it than the fifth criticism, but I wondered how it sat with another discussion, published, indeed, in a Psychology Journal, that might itself fall to this 'range of convenience' critique (Raskin, 2002)?

Part IV returns to some theoretical discussions, two somewhat related, the other a key topic in the context of the real or imagined debate between (social) constructionism and (personal) constructivism. Holmes (p.281-315) offers a critique of 'personal epistemologies' and some ideas which go also to issues raised in other papers elsewhere in the volume. For example, she cites research on indigenous views of cognition and intelligence as part of her challenges to consider knowing in an eco-cultural context, which she discusses in relation to such other contexts as socio-historical and ecological ones and to highlight a claimed epistemological elitism and to expose "blindness and biases". This is 'true' – an interesting notion in terms of Part I – and useful, but releases again my 'demon' of relativism! (and I had tried some 'heal thyself' therapy to slay that demon; Warren, 1992). Related to the matter of epistemologies, more or less, is Stojnov's discussion of the psychotherapist as 'philosopher of science', taking his starting point from George Kelly's model of the 'person as scientist' and the significance to this of different understandings of just what we might take science 'to be'; which is a question in the philosophy of science itself. Stojnov argues well that the model proposed by Kelly is not significantly weakened by developments in and debates about our understanding of what science 'is'. Finally, Butt (p. 361-379) surveys the "status" – an interesting concept, 'status', in the context of the very first two papers of Part I – of 'the individual' as this has played itself out in the debates between constructionism and constructivism, as well as in other perspectives, 'rescuing' the individual in terms of the perspective that is Pragmatism. He also makes the important and valid point that the notion of the individual in Pragmatism was always a 'social one', as personal constructivists would argue it was in George Kelly; hence, one might ask, 'what's all the fuss about social constructionism and personal constructivism?' Maybe, as in dancing, and ac-

knowledging Neimeyer's 'riffs', it is, as in dancing, a dispute about 'who leads'!? Yet, in terms of the analogy with jazz one might conjure with now the riff of the social construction of personal reality, later that of the personal construction of social reality, later still something else? Just like an evening of creative construing, perhaps?

This is a good collection of papers, with something for everyone in the by now 'broad Church' or 'family' in terms of which we seem to be construing ourselves nowadays. There is useful, interesting and practical information, accounts of creative research, reflective writing, rich theory, and challenging and provocative ideas. Whether there are some 'odd bedfellows' in the contributions, overt or covert, and whether 'resonances' are sometimes 'dissonances', are open questions in terms of how the coherence of 'constructivist psychology' is enhanced. That, though, is a question of 'identity' that may already be value-laden, as well as more a 'philosophical' than a 'psychological' question. Thus, if one reads the whole volume then perhaps the broadness of the Church rather than its common or core tenets is more illuminated; and that is both a good and a less-good thing.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bill Warren holds an appointment as a Conjoint Associate Professor in the University of Newcastle, Australia having retired from full-time academic work teaching Philosophy, in 2006. A member of the Colleges of Clinical and Forensic

Psychology of the Australian Psychological Society he continues the private clinical practice in which he has been engaged for some twenty-five years.

Email: William.Warren@newcastle.edu.au

Web:

<http://www.newcastle.edu.au/research-centre/sorti/people/bill-warren.html>

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