

Social Constructionism and its Development

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LY: As you know, I have been studying social constructionism for 10 years, but I still have many questions to ask you. Sometimes you may find I ask questions on behalf of young students who don't know social constructionism very well. Their questions may not be very difficult, but probably represent common doubts about social constructionism. Maybe I can answer some of these questions, but your answers are the most authoritative. Students would like to accept your position and ideas. And also, sometimes I ask questions even on behalf of some positivists. They always stand on traditional empiricist grounds to criticize social constructionism. You may find this kind of question prejudicial and challenging. I hope our interview can clarify some of their confusions. So, you will hear different voices from various questions. It will sound much like a multi-voice song.

KG: Thank you for such a song, but realize the ultimate aim here is not for me to be an authority. The ultimate aim is for a dialogue. I don't mind serving as an authority for a time, but that is not my goal. If it is just one person who speaks, it is unfortunate and it's antithetical to the entire orientation. So, I will play the role of monologist and authority, but it is only temporary. I expect you, your students, and positivists as well to help this to become a dialogue, right?

LY: That's great. Thank you.

1. The developmental situation of the social constructionist movement

LY: For most researchers, their recognition of social constructionism began from reading your famous article "The Social Constructionist Movement in Modern Psychology", which is regarded as an important indication of the emergence of social constructionist psychology. Since then, 26 years have passed, how is this movement developing? Probably there are not accurate numbers, but I think even a rude estimation would be valuable. So, would you mind if I ask some questions about how many American universities or colleges offer courses related to social constructionism nowadays? And how many articles or books in this field have been published in recent years?

KG: You know, it is a complicated question in one way because I don't know everything that has happened. It is also complicated in a second way, because (and this point is important and little understood) constructionism functions on two levels. First it is a metatheory of knowledge, similar to empiricism, for example, as a theory of all claims to knowledge. And secondly, it is a theory in practice, just as cognitive or psychoanalytic theory are theories in practice. So at a metatheory level, constructionism says, let's

realize everything we called knowledge is a communal construction. When we talk about the world, it is not a mirror of the world. It is a way of using words for some purpose, one interpretation among a possible infinity. So there is no truly true account, no truth with the capital "T", no objectivity that is opposed to a subjectivity. This is to say that the metatheory functions as a kind of umbrella, beneath which all accounts of the world (for example, physics, chemistry, religion, psychology, and constructionism as a theory in use) can be located. So, at the level of metatheory, constructionist ideas may simply function as the background for the way you understand what you are doing - in science and everyday life.

And this is what has happened for many fields already. For example, anthropologists went through a crisis in which they realized that when they describe another culture, it is always from a particular perspective, typically Western. You cannot escape your own cultural assumptions when you do research. It's simply what you do. With this realization in place, you start writing anthropology in a different way – with a constructionist consciousness you might say - and you don't necessarily teach a course comparing empiricism (positivism) and constructionism. You just understand that anthropology is a cultural construction. It is the same for many who do narrative psychology. There are a lot of courses in narrative psychology, which have a social constructionist background. The same may be said for virtually all qualitative research. For many psychologists in this group, constructionism is the background for doing their work. They understand they are not trying to establish the truly true; they understand that they are working with interpretations. So you don't have a specific course in social construction; the unspoken assumptions are already in place.

Now, if you understand that, you can say, yes, there are probably hundreds, if not thousands of courses in social construction. And across the disciplines, if I do a web scan I can find over 40,000 books with social construction in the title. Ironically, I have to say that American psychologists are not well represented in this group. In American psychology there is a strong resistance. Everyone learned empiricism; few were ever exposed to an alternative. The resistance is even stronger in American social psychology. The reasons here are complicated. However, social psychology was late to develop, and it needed a rational grounds for its survival in the universities. If they could say, "We are a science," (like biology, chemistry, and physics) then they felt they could gain respect. And these latter sciences all claimed to be empiricist. If social psychologists were now say, "Oh, well, we are not discovering truth, but generating interpretations," they would feel their status threatened. So, for many American social psychologists, I am regarded as somewhat dangerous. Not so if you go to England, Australia, New Zealand, India, Japan, Scandinavia, Italy, or Latin America, for example. That is a much different story. I have very little problems traveling around these parts of the world and being enthusiastically welcomed.

LY: I think social constructionism should be easier to be accepted in China than in American because Chinese people have a different philosophy. The ideas of relationship...

KG: ...are deeply embedded in Chinese culture.

LY: Yes, Chinese people can understand and appreciate them.

KG: I agree. And indeed there are already several of my books on social construction translated into Chinese. I recently had a long talk with a Confucian Psychologist. As you know, constructionism and Confucianism have many affinities. But the difference to me is that in my book, *Relational Being*, I am trying to go beyond both the individual and the community in our understanding. I am trying to place relational process at the heart of all meaning making and to look at units like "individuals" and "communities" as ways we have come to talk about the world, ways that are problematic if one is viewing the world in terms of relationships. To me, the Confucian orientation is largely placing family or community at the center of things. There is another step to be taken.

LY: I also want to know if there are some academic journals that focus on, or have special emphasis on social constructionist articles.

I know *Theory and Psychology* is one of them.

KG: Well, if you just talk about contributions to constructionist theory, then there are few journals. This is primarily because there are few journals in psychology devoted to theory. In addition to *Theory and Psychology*, there is the *Journal of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology*, and in philosophy, *Social Epistemology*. On the level of research, there are numerous journals that feature social constructionist topics. Articles on narrative and discourse alone would number in the thousands. There are also a half dozen journals that feature qualitative methods, and two journals devoted to action research alone. I am especially enthusiastic about the journal, *Qualitative Inquiry*, primarily because it includes work that is really at the cutting edge. I also like *Qualitative Research*, an on-line journal available free on the net. Also important is the open access electronic journal, Forum: Qualitative Social Research, produced in Berlin at the Free University.

If you move into areas of practice, you will find numerous constructionist oriented articles in journals dealing with therapy, social work, organizational development, gerontology, and more.

2. The Taos Institute and its links to China

LY: As the president, would you tell something about the Taos institute? Can I say it is an organization of social constructionists? How many members or faculties do you have?

KG: The Taos Institute is an organization that came into being around 1993, when a number of scholars and practitioner friends met in Taos, New Mexico. It is a non-profit organization dedicated to placing constructionist ideas into dialogue with professional practices, with the hope of creating new and more collaborative means of creating our futures together, and simultaneously enriching constructionist theory. In effect, the Taos Institute is an educational institute. We have conferences and seminars, a publishing company, a PhD program, certificate programs, resource sharing on the web, and so on. Our Associates are represented in eighteen countries – including several in China.

LY: So you can give students PhD degree?

KG: We work collaboratively with Tilburg University, a large university in the southern Netherlands. They award the degree; the Taos Institute runs the program. We are working right now to try the same kind of relationship with another university, this time offering an organizational management degree, call relational leadership. We like to collaborate with different organizations, maybe your own university? When you have time, go on the internet, and look up the Taos Institute website *www.taosinstitute.net*. It is a big site. Take a look at what's going on, look at the Associate list, look at the various programs and find if you have something you want to do.

LY: That is similar to what we want to do. We are planning to initiate a Chinese website to introduce social constructionist theory and discuss about how to take it into practice in Chinese society.

KG: I hope we can be of help to you in this work.

LY: So the Taos Institute is an international organization and big camp of social constructionists, including your PhD education program, your conferences, website, programs, the academic journals you support and your publications, such as the Positive Aging Newsletters, and your dozens of books. It's really a huge and complicated system. I mean, you have so many things to do.

KG: And it is all very exciting to me. So many interesting developments, all over the world.

3. Integrating the positivist paradigm into social construction

LY: Social constructionism in psychology is sometimes called "a movement", sometimes called "a new theory", "a new position", "a theoretical orientation", "an approach" or "a paradigm", etc. As to "a new paradigm", do you think social constructionism has already constituted a new paradigm in Psychology, or in social science?

KG: Well, I think, yes, in certain major ways, it's a new paradigm.

LY: In my opinion, it seems that social constructionist psychology has already possessed most features which are necessary for being a paradigm, including common propositions shared by the members of a little academic community, such as, there is no value-neutral description in the world; whatever perspective we take, it bears something we called "value", etc; some basic theories, for example, self theory, narrative theory, discourse theory, etc. We have had qualitative methods, including deep interviews, text analysis, narrative studies, etc. We have also had a lot of special practices in psychotherapy, education, communication, organization and administration, etc. Then, compared with the definition of paradigm that Kuhn gave in his book "*The Structure of Scientific Revolution*", I think social constructionism has already become a new paradigm. How do

you think about this?

KG: In the way you put it, yes, very much so. If you take constructionism as a general theory of knowledge, it is quite a new paradigm in the sense it differs dramatically from the way we have thought about knowledge for several hundred years. The longstanding romance in the West has been with truth, with a big “T”. And before there was scientific truth with a big “T,” for us there was religious truth. As western society became more secular, science came to be the major holder of the truth. Within the 20th century a general agreement developed that some form of logical empiricism served as its foundation for making truth claims. This theory of knowledge - and let's call it a metatheory, as it is intended to be fully general across all subject matters - influences the way we think about and practice knowledge making. Social construction functions as an alternative metatheory. For us, logical empiricism actually has no grounds, except for those it constructs through dialogue. And if one embraces this metatheory as True, then it places major constraints on our actions as scientists. It is deeply oppressive.

Social constructionism does not claim to be true, and it thus opens the door to multiple ways of engaging in knowledge. It alters the entire way you understand the scientific practice. From a constructionist standpoint you don't want to say that everything proposed by traditional science - or religion for that matter - is wrong. Constructionism does not mean the elimination of any tradition of truth with a small “t.” But as a new paradigm, constructionism does ask practitioners of every kind two major questions: how and for whom is what you are doing useful, and what are the socio-political implications of taking the proposed reality seriously?

LY: I understand.

KG: If I understand knowledge as constructed, then the door is open to multiple forms of understanding, multiple values, and multiple ways of life. In scientific research, for example, I don't have to use quantitative methods. That is just one way of approaching the world, good for some purposes but not for others. I can do a lot of other things. I might want to do research on constructing reality itself, that is on discourse, or constructing reality in conversation, or on the way we tell the story of our lives. Note, however, that such research actively supports the meta-theory. In this case, research and metatheory are congenial. But we don't necessarily want to make all research perfectly consistent with the meta-theory, as this would close down possibilities. In effect, it would radically narrow the potentials of constructionism. As I said, constructionism is not about elimination of voices. For certain purposes, I want to do old-fashioned measurement and prediction. If I want to know, in common terms, if a certain health program reduces smoking, I will want good measures and statistical analysis. Surely, I am using common constructions of reality, but for these purposes I am willing to do so. The results can be useful to millions of people, potentially, and most people would place a value on a longer life. At the same time, I want to remain open to other interpretations or constructions and to alternative ways of thinking about the values embedded in this research.

LY: That is why we say social constructionism is the most open and flexible paradigm.

KG: Exactly! And that's why there is a strong interest here in indigenous psychologies, visions of the person from all cultures. We can all learn from each other.

LY: So I think traditional positivist methods and practices can be integrated into social constructionism as a new, open and bigger paradigm. But I still think it's difficult because it is a shift or revolution in people's worldview. People don't want to give up their old world views, or change their faith, or beliefs.

KG: But let's look further into what's involved here. Constructionism isn't a belief system, standing in conflict with other beliefs or convictions. Constructionism doesn't propose to be True, such that all other ways of talking about the world are false.

LY: So the constructionist metatheory is itself a construction.

KG: Exactly! That means you don't have to think of social constructionism as a competing belief system. You don't have to change your beliefs because constructionism is not a set of claims about what is true. Rather, look at constructionist ideas in terms of the practices they invite. Try them on and see what happens. In this sense, they are more like music or poetry than the Bible or a fundamental ontology.

4. Social constructionism and educational practice

KG: Much of what I am occupied with at present is the encouragement and support of professional practices, especially activities that are congenial with the view that together we create the worlds we inhabit. I am very interested in all sorts of practice - in organizations, therapy, research, politics, the classroom, and so on.

LY: Actually, as a social constructionist, I did change my classrooms. Can I talk about this?

KG: Sure, I'd like to hear about that.

LY: Thank you. If you go to China, you would see Chinese classrooms, and no matter whether in the primary school, high school or in the university, they are all in the same style. They are in the form of a rectangle, and always have a special platform for the teacher, a blackboard in front of the class. And the students seated in different rows.

KG: I have seen this from my visit to Hong Kong.

LY: Yes, the same thing. This is the structure of our traditional classroom. It's a typical place for a teacher's monologue. I tried to change my own classroom. Before the class, I asked the students to move their desks and seats into a different arrangement. It may be like a big circle or fish bones. Sometimes we also arrange them into triangles for different groups. In all these ways, it becomes is a classroom for participation and dialogue, not for monologue any more. Students can talk to each other and also talk with the teacher. The teacher becomes one of the students. It's works pretty well, and students are interested in this kind of change. This is what social constructionism leads me to do; it says, if you

want to change the style of your teaching, then change your position in classroom firstly, change your relationships with students. I think it's reasonable, and it does work.

KG: I really applaud what you are doing.

LY: And I also gave lectures to the teachers of primary and high school. We talked about the advantages and disadvantages of this change. These discussions help the teachers to improve their classes.

KG: You are amazing.

LY: This kind of class and teaching makes students become more interested in their course, compared with the traditional class.

KG: Yes, and you would also be more interested in them.

LY: Yeah, unlike in the traditional class, the teachers' monologues always make students yawn.

KG: Exactly. I suspect that if there were no testing they would not pay attention at all. You know, there are countless teachers now who are influenced by constructionist ideas. Often they try to change their classes from monologue to dialogue, and to find more collaborative ways of doing education. You are not alone. We need a book that will collect these practices.

5. Social construction and qualitative research

LY: In the last ten years, the attitudes in which psychologists have treated different styles of research have become more open and flexible. For example, about 10 years ago in our department, undergraduate students could never earn the title of "outstanding thesis" unless they used positivist and quantitative methods. This "bottom line" has been cancelled now. Outwardly at least, methods are no longer the sole criterion for judging the research. Meanwhile, the research methods in psychology have become more and more diversified. Many qualitative methods, such as deep interviews, text analysis, narrative studies, etc., begin to be put in practice and accepted. Do you agree if I link these changes and emancipations to the influence of the social constructionist movement?

KG: In certain aspects, I think the influence is definitely there. Recalling our earlier discussion, there are two levels of influence to consider. On the level of metatheory I think there is broad, but not always articulated understanding among qualitative researchers that the sciences are constructions of reality. The influence is often subtle, in that people understand the idea even if they didn't read much social constructionism. For example, in the indigenous psychology movement, everyone more or less understands that there are multiple realities possible, multiple methodologies, multiple world-views, without reading one word of social constructionism. The consciousness of multiplicity just becomes the unspoken background within which scholars work. And it's the same

with many people who do qualitative research. They are already moving to the heart of constructionism. So that's a subtle shift, but a major one in some countries. For example, in England, there is a new division of their national psychological association on qualitative research. It started maybe eight years ago, and now is the single largest division of the British psychological society. And a similar thing is beginning to happen now in the United States, where we have almost 2,000 people who are working to create a qualitative research society.

LY: So you mean qualitative research would become a new society in America?

KG: Yes, as part of American Psychological Association.

LY: That's good news.

KG: Yes, it's really good news. I must admit that I am one of the organizers of that movement, but I don't preach social constructionism to those groups. Some of them are humanistic, some are phenomenologists, some are action researchers, and so on. I don't say "Oh well, you are constructionists", even though in their heart they already are. They will have their own way of talking about this.

LY: It was not that way for me. In my case, I selected qualitative research method because I believed in social constructionism. I read many of your books and articles. To accept social constructionism was the starting point for me. I began qualitative research from reading your book. From social constructionist theories to qualitative methods is my route, it's my way. So I thought other people moved in the same way, and must accept social constructionist propositions....

KG: No, I suspect most of them go the other way. They say "Oh, qualitative research, I like to do that," without thinking of its implications. They are not directly influenced by social constructionist ideas, but consciousness of construction is pervasive.

LY: So, they came from different ways to do their own research, but this research is in accordance with social constructionism.

KG: Yes. They don't know the theory exactly, but they understand at a deep level...

LY: Yes. So they are congenial with each other. But don't you think many are influenced by your social constructionist theory? There are different researches like narrative research, action research, discourse research, etc. that got strong support from social constructionism. So we can't say they are only "influenced" by social constructionism. Perhaps there are bidirectional, or double influences here.

KG: Yes, exactly. Let me just take an example. One of the people I work with in the qualitative methods movement is a narrative person, but she is psychoanalytic in her orientation. So we talk a lot. But I wouldn't say to her, "You know narratives are forms of discourse, and such discourse influences what you can say about your experience."

Because she wants to say, “The reports of patients' experience means that psychoanalysis is true.” Of course, she can't support that. But I want to say, “Ok, do psychoanalysis.” She would also begin to feel “Well, I have to do it, but I have to be careful because it's kind of story.” So I will learn about psychoanalysis, but she'll take on just a piece of constructionism. So we'll become part of each. Here is what I don't want to do. I don't want to let constructionist ideas form a wall. I want to keep the boundaries flexible.

LY: So we should not make a wall, but open many windows.

KG: Right, open a dialogue, both ways. So what I found out is that if you close down the borders and say only people who embrace social construction can enter, you create an island. That's both dangerous and against the spirit of constructionism itself. This same bi-directional dialogue occurs in many practice areas.

LY: Yes. I made some studies of solution focused brief therapy and narrative therapy. I think they are much influenced by social constructionism.

KG: Oh, absolutely.

LY: So this means social constructionism does have some great effects on modern psychology.

KG: Certainly in the practice area, and yes, also within education.

LY: So let me say, social constructionism has had an important influence on modern psychology, especially in practice areas.

KG: From my perspective, constructionism is not just an accident historically. It's a more refined form of an emerging global sensitivity. That is, the world is becoming increasingly aware of multiple perspectives, particularly owing to technologies of communication. As we become aware of multiplicities in perspectives and values, and the problem of determining “which one is true or right,” the grounds for constructionism are already established. So in some way, constructionism is simply an articulation - or way of clarifying - something that is already there as a movement in the world. Do you see what I mean? It's like the consciousness that needs the words of constructionism to become aware of itself and its potential.

6. Value loaded natural science

LY: Social constructionists advocate that “there is no value-neutral description or account in the world”. If this proposition were limited to the social sciences and humanistic disciplines, there might be little controversy. But once it is expended into the field of natural science, many scientists are firmly opposed to it. You know, most people can understand social sciences are social constructionist, but...

KG: Yes, but "not natural sciences!"

LY: Yes, that's the question. Most scientists insist that even if social sciences are value-involved, natural sciences are affirmatively value-neutral. They always ask, "Do you mean the propositions such as "all animals and plants are made of cells", which has been examined under the microscopes, are not value-neutral? What kind of value is it involved in? How to answer these questions?"

KG: All right. If you understand the ideological character of the social sciences, that's the first step. Then you can see that every experiment in social sciences is value loaded.

LY: Yes. Many years ago, even social scientists didn't admit the social science knowledge is socially constructed. They just want to be a "real scientist" to pursue "objective truth". But nowadays, more and more social scientists admit, "Ok, yes, my research on social science is, somehow, constructed." I think this is kind of progress.

KG: ...but that's the first level. If people understand that there are many ways of describing and explaining, then you can begin to see that such choices have political implications.

LY: Yes. But it seems that most natural scientists disagree.

KG: But now go the second step and look at the cases in which natural sciences try to talk about human behavior, like biology, ethology, and Darwinian Theory. Just take those cases and begin to ask about the political implications of what is offered as knowledge. Just the simple proposition, "the human species has evolved..." is loaded with value. It places a value on present achievements over the past, and treats those who do not embrace these achievements as somehow less evolved. To define the human behavior in terms of brain function - as neuroscientists are likely to do - is totally value loaded. It removes the significance of culture, and suppresses imagination about new forms of action. All scientific statements - and all truth claims for that matter - are value loaded in this sense; they invite certain ways of life, and discourage or prevent others. Not even physics is value neutral, suggesting as it does a totally materialistic account of our lives.

LY: Yes. I am just thinking about a word, "brain-dead"? Do you have this word in English?

KG: Brain-dead. Yes.

LY: In China, there is a strong dispute about brain-dead and heart death. I think they are different definitions of death, of people who are still alive or dead.

KG: Right. Death is a social construction. To be sure, something happens when we speak of dying, but how you understand it and what value you place on it are socially derived.

LY: That's value involved.

KG: Yes. If your DNA is still alive, are you dead? I mean if we can go back and take a piece of DNA from you and...

LY: Keep it frozen.

KG: Yes, right.

LY: Now that you gave DNA to your son, your grandson, are you still alive?

KG: Yes. Are you still alive?

LY: It depends on the different definitions of death.

KG: All right, now if you can take the second step we can ask about the value placed on death for a biologist. For biology, like physics and chemistry, the body is simply material. In that sense, these disciplines represent a denial of spirituality. So the way of life promoted by biology, physics and chemistry eliminates the language of spirit, and the value of the spirit within the body from the world of dialogue. So the biological account of death seems value neutral, but it is stepping on the toes, or eliminating, other positions. That doesn't make it wrong or bad, that just means being aware, being cautious of what you are doing. So it doesn't become *the* truth, but...

LY: ...just "a" truth, not "the" truth. So people can have different choices, not just only one.

KG: Yes, I like the phrase, "a truth" very much. In a sense, constructionism does three things. The first is to ask, "What is the practical value of embracing any particular construction of the world?" This is a pragmatic criterion. Don't ask whether a construction is ultimately true, but whether it is useful for some purpose. For whom and for what? Secondly, constructionism opens a space for critique. It says, be aware of the values embedded in a given construction, and conscious of who is favored or eliminated from the conversation as a result. Are your findings useful for people making bombs, only useful for the rich, and so on. The third question constructionists ask concerns creating futures. As a constructionist, you ask, "Could it be otherwise?" "Could we explore new possibilities?" I don't live *in the truth*, but I live in possibilities, and together we can create.

7. Responding to the criticism of anti-realism and relativism

LY: This is the last question. Social constructionism was always criticized for its "anti-realism" and "relativism". Do you think these are critical difficulties for social constructionism in terms of its being accepted more generally?

KG: Acceptance is always difficult for those who are unwilling to see their ideas about the world, or about right and wrong, as possibilities as opposed to necessities. However, in the case of anti-realism or relativism, much of the critique is based on misunderstanding.

As I have found, there are two issues about relativism. One of them is the criticism of nihilism, or in effect, "are you saying that nothing is real at all? So is death not real? Poverty is not real?" and so on. For most normal people, when they hear that critique, it sounds like constructionism is insane. How could anyone believe in that? But this is not what constructionism is saying. There is no declaration that "nothing is real," as that is an ontological claim. Rather, constructionists simply say that there is no justification for presuming that our language of the real is somehow a mirror or map of what exists. And we seem to have far greater options if we presume that our discourse is socially generated to serve particular purposes. If the critic says, "you mean to say, human beings can fly; that's ridiculous," I may reply "Well, watch!" Then I make a little jump. The critic says, "That's not flying". And I reply, "Well, that's what I call 'flying.'" If I call that "flying" I can fly. Whether I can fly or not – in reality - is a matter of whose definition you are using, and for what purposes. It's not a matter of whether I can REALLY fly, but who is defining what I am doing.

But let's put this in another way. What is the reality of death? Let's say someone is lying there, not breathing. What is the reality? A little child might say "Oh, he is sleeping". It wouldn't be what we call death. A doctor would call it death, but only by examining the heart or brain. If you were deeply Christian, the spirit is not dead. So there are many interpretations in what you called "death." When you only have one construction of what you call "illness", or "poverty," for example, it limits the possibilities of what it is you can do? If the biological view of death is the only view we have, it's very limited. If the government's view of poverty is the only view we have of poverty, it is extremely narrow. What else could you say about it? How else could we describe or interpret? So the tendency toward realism - death is real, poverty is real, cancer is real, and so on - constrains our possibilities. We are dealing here with conventions of talking and they could be otherwise.

LY: Most people around us are empiricists. They all believe there is a real world or a kind of "reality" that exists outside our consciousness. That means, the "reality" must be something that does exist. But when social constructionists say the word "reality", they refer to a kind of "meaning", the meaning of something, of what we call, or what we think of. For social constructionists, the world is full of meanings rather than "reality" or "actuality".

KG: Well, if you ask "what is real" outside any language, how can you answer this question? But there are ways you can respect the empiricists. You can always speak of, "reality in a tradition." Once you are in the tradition of construction, you create solid realities. This is a coffee cup in front of me because that's our tradition of talking. For me, it's real, and everyone knows that's a coffee cup. The advantage for the constructionist is to call attention to the tradition in which it's a coffee cup. Thus, it could be a teacup. It could be a weapon. It could be a paperweight. It could be an art object. Our options multiply.

LY: But for these people who criticize constructionism, they think the coffee cup is just a coffee cup. It is a simple reality. They are wondering how you could deny such a simple reality. So I think the most important step to respond to this critique is to clarify the

meaning of “reality”, that is to illustrate, how do social constructionists understand the word “reality”?

KG: I think you are on the right track. There is a phrase that I used once that a lot of people found useful. As I proposed, social constructionism is "ontologically mute." That is, in terms of what really exists, there is nothing to say. .

LY: You mean to keep silence on ontology?

KG: Precisely. I don't deny what exists; I don't assert it either. I don't even know how to answer the question. Let's not argue about it.

LY: For many critics, relativism is really a problem to social constructionism, and it is difficult to answer. Do you think social constructionism is a kind of relativism?

KG: Well, it depends on what you mean by the word “relativism”.

LY: Then what's your understanding?

KG: For many critics, relativism refers to the position that one statement about reality is as good as another, or in terms of truth, "you think everything is equal." But actually, no one really argues that position. The critique is simply irrelevant. But, if you mean by relativism, that there are many ways of putting things, many ways of describing things, and when you make decisions, there are no transcendental criteria by which you can determine which is better, then, yes, many constructionists would agree. Constructionists would say, “Sure, there are times when one description is much better than another”. If you want to make a cake, it's better to follow the cookbook's descriptions than a fairy tale or myth. Obviously some descriptions are better than others for certain purposes. So, it's not that everything is equal. It's never equal. It's always in context, in the practice, in a tradition.

LY: So it doesn't mean something is absolutely better than something else, and it also doesn't mean everything is equal. It does mean in specific situations, some ways to do something are better than others. Is that right?

KG: Just right. The same argument also applies to the critique of moral relativism. There simply is no constructionist argument that says, one morality is as good as another, or that all political and ideological ideas are equal. Constructionists simply point to the way in which moralities, political systems, ideologies, and religions are historically and culturally contingent.

LY: But I still have some questions about this. We always need to negotiate, and get a better way, not your way, not my way, but our way. If we can get a compromise, it's very good. But if we can't eventually get a compromise, how can we resolve the problem? Because we have no standard to evaluate or judge what is better. You like your way, but I can't do things in that way. So we will be fighting. That would be the critical problem.

How are we to resolve this problem.

KG: A very good point. But let's say that if there are no ultimate standards of the good, we can view these conflicts as challenges for practice, how we can go on together in our relationships.

LY: That's different within traditional empiricist frame. They have some absolutely criteria. That's the difference.

KG: Actually, empiricists have no answers at all to issues of morality, or the good. As they say, science is about what is, and not what ought to be. For constructionists, however, when we confront competing realities the question is whether we can find ways to communicate that are not trying to determine who wins. An example would be the practice of Appreciative Inquiry. If we could get the antagonists together to tell stories, and let's say, stories about when we have done good things together, what might happen? Let's not talk about why we're different. Let's talk about the ways in which we value the same thing. In effect, we change the conversation.

LY: So, you have changed the definitions of the participants, no longer enemies, but collaborators.

KG: Exactly, and by shifting the form of the conversation, we open the possibility of creating something new together. So that's a practical solution to the challenge of conflict. As psychologists, then, let us create new forms of dialogue, new and more promising ways of talking with each other. Because such traditions as, "I'm right and you're wrong," or, "it's your fault, and not my fault;" or "my God is the true god and yours is not," are killing us. We must find alternative forms of dialogue.

LY: So, we have here another new horizon. Thank you very much for taking so much time for my interview. On behalf of Chinese Psychologists and myself, thank you again.

KG: It's my pleasure.