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## **Social Construction and Everyday Life**

By Mary Gergen

Sometimes it is difficult to converse with folks who are curious about social constructionism, but skeptical as to what it might mean for them personally. Often people say, "Academic people have fun tossing around philosophical terms like that, but what can you say that will help us get on with real life, face real problems, and look for real solutions?" When I toss my metaphorical mortarboard in the trash, and confront these questions my immediate response is "everything". Let me just mention two important consequences. The first is to call attention to the ways in which the language we use creates the world we are in. If one says to a spouse "I am totally fed up with the way you criticize me," one is labeling him/her as a villain of sorts, and an argument might well ensue. However, if you say, "I'm feeling pretty disappointed in you" a different reality is constructed, even though a tense conversation might still result. But if you say, "It really hurts me when you say things like that, and I think it's destructive to our relationship as well," chances are that with this construction a more positive dialogue will occur. The words we use to describe an event, person, place, or possibility have the effect of creating it, and the actions that are likely to follow. In every moment we can select from a panoply of possibilities.

When we take a social constructionist position, we recognize that there are many ways of perceiving, analyzing, and interpreting the world. Each one carries values and action potentials, and eliminates others. The "world" does not tell us what "words" we must use. The only limits derive from cultural traditions, and these are multiple and mutable. I am not speaking only of words here; tones, gestures, posture, facial expressions all contribute to the construction of what may become a shared reality. In taking a constructionist position we can avoid the dead-ends of life, where there may be nothing but conflict, frustration, and despair ahead of us. I still "burn" when I recall a young woman working for a pharmaceutical company who said, "Face it, everyone over 60 is a patient." Being given permission to see things another way is the liberatory gift that constructionism gives us.

Recently a young entrepreneur from the Philippines was discussing how he managed to persist despite the natural disasters that had destroyed much of the area where he lived. He said that where others saw only loss and destruction, he saw tremendous opportunities. So much devastation left room for so much development. This young man intuitively had a constructionist bent that will serve him well as he engages in the redesign of his homeland. His capacity to re-construct reminds us that constructionist ideas give us the gift of creating new and amazing realities, ones that are filled with the promise of a more fulfilling future than we might otherwise have known.