



## **Why I Am Not a Social Constructionist**

By Kenneth Gergen

This is the final of three commentaries on recent dialogues about social construction, its meaning and possible entailments. My comments here are in reply to the frequent question of whether person X is, or is not, a social constructionist. For some of us, the question is in terms of whether one is an "empiricist" or a "constructionist," "a realist" or a "constructionist," or a "constructivist" or "constructionist." My special concern here lies in the implication that constructionism is a belief system - a set of ideas that are either true or false, good or evil, or in which one should or should not place their faith. In my view, to approach constructionism in this tradition fails to appreciate its dramatic implications. Constructionist ideas challenge the very assumption that words can accurately or objectively map the world. Thus it makes little sense to ask whether any scientific theory, religious teaching, or system of ideas - including social constructionist - is fundamentally or universally TRUE or FALSE. Yes, there are local truths, agreements of various groups of people in various situations. (Only if we agree, can it be said that Ken Gergen is the author of these words.)

As constructionist ideas suggest, rather than asking about ultimate truth, the important questions concern the implications for our lives *together*. How does a given set of ideas contribute to human well-being; who do they advantage and disadvantage; do they lead to more freedom or domination; do they sustain the planet or destroy it; and so on. These are obviously questions of value, but all the better. As we speak together about the world so do we create our futures. If so, what futures do we wish for the world? In the same way, you don't have to ask whether an operatic aria is true or false, though you might ask about how the aria plays out in human affairs. But it would make little sense to ask whether I am a "Wagnerian" or a "Verdiist." Nor does it make sense to say that "I am a constructionist" in the sense that I embrace these ideas as fundamental beliefs. Nor am I an empiricist, a realist, a constructivist, a Christian, or a Muslim. Rather, I am capable of participating in all these various ways of understanding the world - and more - without having to ask if they are TRUE. This is no small matter. For me, one of the wondrous implications of constructionist ideas is that when I take them on, they open the richest world of possibilities - without fighting over the high ground of Truth.