Abstract. The articles in this issue signify the maturation of social constructionism. After introducing the articles, I raise two questions that have remained under-represented on these pages. First, the historicization of constructionism has been avoided by constructionists and critics alike; and, second, the epistemological concerns have been dominated by realist–anti-realist debates. I conclude by inviting further responses on these questions for a future issue of the journal.

Key Words epistemology, realism–anti-realism, social constructionism

This special issue is not a special issue, at least not in the normal sense. Typically special issues take a fair amount of planning and organizing between Editor and Guest Editors on questions such as who will be invited to write, who will review the contributions, and so on. In the case of this issue, all of the contributions, save the Comment by Kenneth Gergen, were originally manuscripts that came to the journal in the usual manner as regular submissions. And each was submitted within approximately the same half-year period. As the reviewers’ comments came in and it became clear that these papers were going to be published, I decided to bundle them. Instead of asking for a reply from social constructionist authors to each paper, I asked Ken Gergen to write an omnibus response to all of them without responding to every point in each. This allowed just sufficient space to create a single issue—I will indicate further opportunities for response below.

Why social constructionism and why now? To modify an analogy once used to describe ethnomethodology, one of the main features of the constructionist ‘movement’ in recent years has been the sense that it has left the gritty, exciting and perhaps even dangerous downtown streets of academia and has settled comfortably into its suburbs. These suburbs contain many diverse but largely non-threatening neighbors, such that the term ‘social constructionism’ no longer leads people to draw their blinds or call out the dogs. Earlier outright dismissal has led to some attempts at tolerance, if not outright cohabitation and eventual reevaluation.
It is not surprising that, given social constructionism’s medium-term survival, if not success, there should emerge a new set of critics who are not as dismissive as the first critics were, but who have also probed deeper and asked more difficult questions. Gone are the facile claims of nihilism and anti-science, to be replaced with searing questions about the nature of the enterprise, its place in the academy, and its ultimate objectives.

As a journal we have published both serious critical analyses on social constructionism (e.g. Danziger, 1997; Fisher, 1995; Greenwood, 1992; Mancuso, 1996; Marková, 2000; Michael, 1997) and, in the context of other topics, occasional brief critiques. Nonetheless, the past few years have seen an increase in the number of papers submitted that articulate one or another criticism of this position. Unfortunately, many of these papers have not survived the review process and made it to the pages of the journal. Some have repeated criticism that has been aired before or did not display sufficient familiarity with the constructionist literature, and simplified where caution should have prevailed. This is not the case, however, with the articles published in this issue. These authors have tackled a series of critical questions in new ways or have developed points of view in new directions. In the remainder of this introduction I wish to introduce the articles, make a case for two problems that remain insufficiently articulated, and conclude by issuing an invitation to contribute to future discussions on these questions.

This Issue

The issue opens with two articles by Fiona Hibberd. In the first of these critical presentations she makes the historical case that social constructionism, at least as it is articulated by Kenneth Gergen, is indebted to the position she describes as conventionalism. The latter consists of the claim that terms and relations within a theoretical framework are entirely or partially determined by other terms (within that framework) or are the expression of normative practices of communities of scientists. Furthermore, social constructionism shares this view with the logical positivists or such representative figures of that movement as Schlick, Reichenbach and Carnap. Given that logical positivism is typically held to be deeply mistaken, it follows that social constructionism has been likewise ensnared by a similarly mistaken view. In a second article, Hibberd proposes that social constructionism and logical positivism also share a common understanding of the notion of ‘meaning-as-use’, and both share certain epistemological similarities deeply rooted in Kantian phenomenalism.

In a similarly realist-inspired critique, John Maze takes social constructionism (again, largely Gergen’s) to task for its internal contradictions. These include its incapacity to assert anything at all given its claims on the nature of language, objects, reality, and the like, and the argument that
Objectivism is inherently authoritarian. In Maze’s paper, social constructionism is tied to Derrida and deconstructionism, whereby the former is a species of the latter and the mistakes follow from one into the other.

Alexander Liebrucks follows a line of argument that is less hostile to social constructionism by arguing that it cannot help but be compatible with realism if it is at all serious about its central theses. In other words, social constructionism, in order to do what it sets out to do especially in its manifestations in social studies of science research, is neither antithetical to realism nor is it epistemologically relative (only methodologically so). Furthermore, the constitution of psychology’s subject matter on a constructionist account is no less scientific for all its cultural content, reflexive impact on its understanding of phenomena, and its conventional (as opposed to causal) explanatory approach.

In the fifth of the articles selected for this issue, Adelbert Jenkins criticizes the constructionist enterprise for, among other things, its failure to distinguish content from process. On his account, the content of the self differs radically across cultures but the processes that presumably generate and maintain that self are universal. Drawing on a dialectical account, he argues that notions of ‘self’ and ‘other’ are mutually created and sustained. Such a humanistic conception denies neither the individual nor sociocultural processes crucial for our understanding of persons.

These critical articles are followed by one written in response for this issue, namely Gergen’s reply to his critics. Gergen takes on three of the major issues from a ‘pragmatic’ standpoint within constructionism: the problem of referentiality; the question of realism; and the nature of criticism more generally.

Edley’s article reminds us of a distinction earlier made by Derek Edwards (1997) between ontological and epistemic views of social constructionism. On this account, most social constructionists are so in the epistemic sense, namely they are constructionist about descriptions rather than the entities that are so described. In this sense, constructionism (and discursive psychology) is always primarily concerned with accounts and descriptions. Or as Edwards (1997) has it, ‘attributions of agency, intelligence, mental states, and their attendant problems are in the first place participants’ categories and concerns (manifested in descriptions, accusations, claims, error accounts, membership disputes, etc.), just as much as reality, imitation and authenticity are’ (p. 319). Edley’s claim is that much contemporary debate is based on a confusion of the two senses of social constructionism. Finally, we present two book reviews on recent works by constructionist authors, Gergen and Harré respectively.

Two (of many possible) issues remain reasonably unarticulated in these articles. Hence let me address these briefly, but not fully, and at least indicate where the discussion might still go.
Varieties of Constructionism

What is social constructionism? Sometimes called a movement, at other times a position, a theory, a theoretical orientation, an approach; psychologists remain unsure of its status. At its most general it serves as a label denoting a series of positions that have come to be articulated after the publication of Berger and Luckmann’s influential work in 1966 but that have been influenced, modified and refined by other intellectual movements such as ethnomethodology, social studies of science, feminism, post-structuralism, narrative philosophy and psychology, post-foundational philosophy and post-positivist philosophy of science, and more (see Burr, 1995; Stam, 1990). That there is no single social constructionist position is now more obvious than ever, and that positions that have never labeled or identified themselves as social constructionism are sometimes labeled in this way simply adds to the confusion. Like the term ‘postmodernism’, social constructionism is not a single target (for its critics) nor a single movement (for its enthusiasts). Even limiting oneself to psychology, the vast distinctions between such positions as have been articulated in the pages of this journal alone by Kurt Danziger, Derek Edwards, Ken Gergen, Rom Harré, Jill Morawski, Jonathan Potter, Edward Sampson, John Shotter, Margaret Wetherell (assuming these individuals would even wear the mantle) and others make it nearly impossible to classify a single position. The frequent conflation of postmodernism with social constructionism adds to the confusion, since the former is even more ambiguous a label, not to mention that in many respects social constructionism is thoroughly and respectably modernist in intent and practice.

Of course, having said all this, it is not out of the question that a list could be drawn up with appropriate similarities and some key set of defining features found that many could agree do function as central to the enterprise called ‘social constructionism’. But this is beside the point. What counts as constructionism is often dependent on the author’s or critic’s aims. For what seems important to many of our authors is to critique a particular version, namely that associated with Ken Gergen. One of the more interesting phenomena has been the reluctance among some of our authors to tackle more than what was represented by Gergen’s writings. This is fair enough insofar as an author may choose whatever target is deemed crucial to the author’s purposes. Nonetheless, the focus on a single position sometimes lapses into a version of ahistoricism, ignoring the rich traditions that have led the social sciences to choose something like ‘social constructionism’ at the start of the 21st century. For what is at play here are not just competing claims for intellectual priorities and changes, shifting academic fashions and the repudiation of the scientism that reigned so long in the form of positivism: the emergence of social constructionism also coincides with the coming of age of a generation of scholars whose academic tutelage was colored by political activism and the rapid growth of post-war universities,
followed by their recent and equally dramatic restructuring as branch plants of the corporate world. While I don’t mean this as a reductive account of the enterprise and individuals involved, it is nonetheless a problem for constructionism itself (as well as its critics) that as a position that takes ‘accounting’ seriously, it rarely accounts for its own appearance on the academic stage. Hence the absence of history leaves one with the image of the hidden hand of progress driving the entire enterprise of social constructionism, an image more consistent with the scientism it sought to overthrow. None of the critics seem eager to address these issues thus far.

Epistemology: Knowing of the Best Kind

That epistemology is so frequently the major source of controversy is not surprising given the focus on this problem by constructionists themselves. What frequently emerges, however, is that constructionism is castigated on the grounds that either (a) it is not realist, or (b) it assumes realism. There is indeed a long tradition to the problem of realism and its antithesis, updated in recent years by philosophers such as Michael Dummett, Thomas Nagel, Hilary Putnam and John Searle. Nonetheless, it is clear that once one has taken the position of a committed realist, social constructionism quickly falls into place as a species of anti-realism. And depending on the particular target, it is only a simple matter of citation to show that any number of claims fulfill the criteria of anti-realism and hence are in error. This is even more so the case when one assumes that any position warrants itself by an implicit appeal to realism. I certainly do not wish to claim that there are no functions to such debates, and the articles in this issue highlight the importance of drawing out the consequences of these positions. But realism is notoriously difficult to justify from first principles—witness the debates in philosophy and elsewhere. There may indeed be good reasons to be a realist, but one of its consequences is the often obsessive concern with skepticism and error that inevitably follows. All manner of debates and positions can be recast into divisions of skepticism and its realist alternatives, often with considerable simplification. However, once one asks for a psychology that is explicitly realist (as opposed to a constructionist, phenomenalist, instrumentalist one, etc.), we are suddenly left with very little to go on. Now I want to be the first to admit that the lack of a large, explicitly realist, body of work in psychology is not an argument against realism. But it is not much of an advertisement either.

Recent works by Edwards (1997) and Potter (1996) have addressed these issues explicitly and in considerable detail from the constructionist perspective, but their concerns have not filtered through in many of these papers. Furthermore, while this issue of the journal contains several explicit realist critiques of Gergen’s work, there is little on, for example, Harré’s
position, which argues for a realist social constructionism. Clearly, then, these debates are far from complete or finished.

An Invitation

There is no doubt a great deal more that could be added to both the critique and the defense of the positions generally taken as social constructionist. Hence we will consider further papers on these issues in the form of full-length submissions or comments of 2500 words that will be published in a later issue. It is our intent to publish these in a single issue, and papers and comments must be received by the end of 2001. It is also advisable to let the Editor know that you intend to submit a paper or to ask in advance if a particular topic warrants further development.

Although, in practice, there may be a limit to the utility of these discussions, or downright fatigue, we are certainly willing to give our readership the last word. In the spirit of a frank and clear exchange, I invite you to contribute to this ongoing debate.

References


HENDERIKUS J. STAM is Professor of Psychology at the University of Calgary and a member of the Theory Program in the Department of Psychology. He is founding and current Editor of *Theory & Psychology*. ADDRESS: Department of Psychology, University of Calgary, Calgary, Alberta, Canada T2N 1N4. [email: stam@ucalgary.ca]