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Review of An Invitation to Social Construction

Philip Manning

Cleveland State University, p.manning@csuohio.edu

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An Invitation to Social Construction.

By Kenneth J. Gergen. Sage Publications, 1999. 248 pp.

Reviewer: PHILIP MANNING, *Cleveland State University*

Although Kenneth Gergen's new book invites readers to enter the world of social constructionists, in a sense it charges admission for the privilege, above and beyond the price of the book itself. This is because the reader has to work hard to follow Gergen's path through texts that to an outsider appear to have little in common with each other. This of course raises questions about our expectations about both "invitations" and "introductions." A student picking up an introductory text about, say, organic chemistry, might reasonably expect to be led by the hand through the material. A smart student may even be able to do very well in the course without consulting anything else and without attending class lectures. The same cannot be said for Gergen's guide. His mission is not simply (or even primarily) to describe social constructionism; rather he is trying to demonstrate it. Thus Gergen is inspiring students to educate themselves, to learn through participation in an ambitious (if virtual) "reading group." What Gergen is doing is trying to make us excited about the prospect of reading a rather disparate group of interdisciplinary figures whose work he thinks constitutes social constructionism.

So, this book will frustrate the reader who rather passively wants to be informed about social constructionism. Instead it will be of interest to those who want to be

inspired to participate in an interdisciplinary conversation. This is not to say that what Gergen writes about a wide range of people is uninteresting, but his comments are often general. Sometimes this is disappointing, especially when his account seems cursory, as it is of Goffman. However, on other occasions Gergen reveals a gift for succinctly pointing to a key element of someone's work. For example, in introducing Derrida's contribution to literary theory, Gergen suggested that one of the implications of deconstruction is that all efforts to make rational decisions involve a "massive suppression of meaning." This struck me as a very good way of thinking about one of Derrida's concerns. Similarly, Gergen's observation that one of Winch's main claims in *The Idea of a Social Science* is that theories are constitutive of their phenomena is an incisive way of introducing a self-consciously Wittgensteinian reading of the social sciences. Of course, there is the danger that someone reading Gergen and being introduced to these ideas for the first time might overestimate his or her grasp of Derrida, Winch, or others. Gergen's project is best thought of as an *inspirational guide* to broad, contemporary, theoretical issues, not as an adequate summary of them. Given Gergen's massive scope, it could hardly be otherwise. With this in mind, it would have been better for each chapter to offer a very specific set of readings, rather than a general reading list that is likely to be intimidating to this book's intended audience.

The book begins by discussing the various crises in traditional approaches to knowledge that create the possibility of social constructionism. Subsequent chapters introduce important themes for Gergen: the role of language in constituting our view of the world, reflexivity, indeterminacy and the omnipresence of power relations. For what it's worth, I kept noticing how close many of Gergen's themes are to those found in Max Weber's methodological writings. Gergen often approaches the definitions of key terms (such as *social constructionism*) circuitously, and some useful distinctions and definitions are relegated to the footnotes. The second part of the book considers what might be thought of as "applications" of social constructionism, paying particular attention to issues concerning therapy and pedagogy. Gergen also touches upon methodological strategies that are consistent with a constructionist perspective.

Gergen has certainly managed to convey his excitement for a wide range of contemporary ideas. For some, this book will be the impetus to begin an intellectual journey, with a broad map in hand. For others, it will be a disappointment. They will feel that it promises more than it delivers, and that by the end they are still not very sure what social constructionism is or what the fuss is about.