

## Personal Construct Psychology, Radical Constructivism, and Social Constructionism: A Dialogue

Jay S. Efran

*Department of Psychology, Temple University, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, USA*

Sheila McNamee

*Department of Communication, University of New Hampshire, Durham, New Hampshire, USA*

Bill Warren

*Faculty of Education and Arts, University of Newcastle, New South Wales, Australia*

Jonathan D. Raskin

*Psychology Department and Counseling Graduate Program, State University of New York at  
New Paltz, New Paltz, New York, USA*

This article presents a dialogue about personal construct psychology, radical constructivism, and social constructionism. The dialogue is based on a symposium conducted in July 2011 at the 19th International Congress on Personal Construct Psychology. Jay Efran, Sheila McNamee, and Bill Warren were the participants, with Jonathan Raskin as moderator. The dialogue addresses points of contact and divergence across these three theories, how these theories deal with the issue of relativism, and how theorists from these three perspectives might best “go on” together.

One’s first encounter with constructivism can be quite confusing. First, constructivists often rely on highly technical and idiosyncratic language that—all too often—they do not adequately define for newcomers. Second, constructivism is not a singular theory, but a family of related theories that are not always seen as compatible. Third, perhaps due to these perceived incompatibilities, there is sometimes disagreement (even among the participants in the exchange below) about which theories are best labeled “constructivist.” Despite these definitional difficulties, the goal of this article is to introduce three theories that Jonathan Raskin (2002), the convener of the dialogue, has previously argued are usefully categorized as constructivist: social constructionism, radical constructivism, and personal construct psychology.

The conversation that follows is based on a symposium conducted in Boston at the 19th International Congress on Personal Construct Psychology in July 2011. The symposium was

---

Received 16 January 2013; accepted 20 January 2013.

Address correspondence to Jonathan D. Raskin, Psychology Department and Counseling Graduate Program, State University of New York at New Paltz, 600 Hawk Drive, New Paltz, NY 12561–2440. E-mail: raskinj@newpaltz.edu

structured as a free-wheeling panel discussion on the similarities and differences between personal construct theory, radical constructivism, and social constructionism. Sheila McNamee represented social constructionism, Jay Efran radical constructivism, and Bill Warren personal construct theory. Jonathan Raskin served as moderator. They were chosen because of their seminal work in these areas (Efran & Fauber, 1995; Efran & Lukens, 1985; Efran, Lukens, & Lukens, 1990; McNamee, 1996, 2004; McNamee & Gergen, 1992; McNamee & Hosking, 2012; Warren, 1992, 1998). The goal was not to systematically present these theories in their theoretical totality, but to provide the flavor of each theory so that those encountering them for the first time had a starting point from which to begin further exploration. This article presents an edited transcript of the symposium. In addition to revising some of what was said in the service of clarity and precision, the chronology of some material has been reorganized to make the narrative easier to follow.

## PERSONAL CONNECTIONS TO THE THEORIES

### The Promiscuous Social Constructionist

RASKIN: Sheila, tell us a little bit about why social constructionism. What draws you to it?

MCNAMEE: Of course, the answer to that question will be different tomorrow or later today. For now, by way of grounding myself, as an undergraduate I studied personal construct psychology (Kelly, 1955/1991a, 1955/1991b). I was a complete devotee of Humberto Maturana (Maturana & Varela, 1992) and Ernst von Glasersfeld (1995). So in a way I define myself as promiscuous; I like to mix things up. But my home discipline is not psychology, it is communication. For me, as a constructionist, the focus is on language, where language refers to all embodied activity. It is not just words or text. This focus for me is very important as a communication scholar; recognizing that we create our world in what we do together is very powerful. It takes us out of pathologizing individuals. If I locate problems in someone's conflicted processes or psyche, then that person has a problem. If I can look at patterns of relationship and the ways that people coordinate their activities, I am looking more at social and cultural discourses.

EFRAN: Before we go on, I wanted to ask Sheila why she left Maturana and radical constructivism and found another home in social constructionism.

MCNAMEE: Good question. I like the way Maturana talks. I like his idea of structure determinism. But to me it's just one discourse. I like to use it when it is useful. Just taking a step back before I answer this question, from my point of view social construction allows us to look at any way of being in the world, any way of talking, as a viable option for coordinating and negotiating through the social world with others. So if I want to use the discourse of biology, or psychology, or mental states, I can use it. And I would use it, but I would not use it because it is the right one but because it is useful and generative. I started seeing Maturana's work in radical constructivism like that—a useful way of talking sometimes. Social construction allows me to abandon the idea of a canon dictating, "This

is the way you have to work.” It allows me to be present in the moment and responsive to others.

### The Radical Constructivist Instructor Who Wasn't Instructing Anyone

RASKIN: Let me shift over to Jay. What drew you to radical constructivism?

EFRAN: Well, I was minding my own business, hanging out with some family therapists—not because I was a family therapist particularly, but because that was the group within clinical psychology that seemed to have a hearing for constructivist themes and system themes. I had become enamored of Bateson's (1979) book, *Mind and Nature*, which I was using in a number of graduate courses. And then, in about 1985, I happened upon the article by Paul Dell (1985) in the *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, in which he talks about the fact that Bateson said that the person who is now extending the kind of work Bateson had been doing was Maturana. So that's the first time I had heard about Maturana. I was then intrigued by several articles Dell wrote about Maturana. I went to Washington, DC, to a conference to hear Paul Dell speak about it, and I found it intriguing, odd, bizarre. One of the things that puzzled me most is that they talked about the so-called “myth of instructive interaction,” which means that you cannot teach a system (including us) anything directly. And because I thought I was teaching every day, I didn't quite know what to make of this. But I couldn't dismiss it. And the more I looked into what that might mean, the more sense it made to me and the more it helped explain why sometimes an intervention with a client worked wonderfully, but when I tried exactly the same thing with another client who I thought had the same or similar problems, it had no effect whatsoever. To oversimplify a bit and explain what the myth of instructive interaction is all about: Maturana asserts that from the point of view of a biologist, living systems are informationally closed—that is, things don't get in and they don't get out. From the outside, you can trigger a change, but you cannot directly instruct. Think of it as having a toaster and a washing machine. The toaster is going to toast, no matter what you do. And the washing machine is going to wash, no matter what you do. And they both can be triggered by electricity. But the electricity doesn't tell the toaster what to do. The toaster's structure tells the toaster what to do. So similarly, we trigger organisms, but what they do has to do with their internal structure—including their nervous system—and the way it responds to various perturbations. What Maturana says is that the only time there is instructive interaction is in the story of King Midas. You may remember that King Midas did a favor for the gods and they gave him a gift such that whatever he touched turned to gold. So he touched this cup, it turned into gold. He touched the table, it turned to gold. He touched his daughter, and she turned to gold. Maturana says that the tragedy of King Midas is that he could never be an analytic chemist. Because that would represent true instructive interaction, wherein something does what you want it to do as opposed to what it, in accordance with its own structure and nature, does. Analytic chemistry depends on the fact that you do things, you trigger something, and you watch its reaction. So that got me started. I'll stop there.

### The Philosophical Personal Construct Psychologist

**RASKIN:** Bill, tell us about how you wound up with personal construct psychology as part of your professional life; and then also share some basic ideas about how you feel it is similar to or different from how Jay and Sheila talked about social constructionism and radical constructivism.

**WARREN:** To answer the first question, I don't know. I just fell into it by accident. I was researching the area of death and dying and existentialism. My research assistant presented me with something about the Death Threat Index. I didn't know what the threat index was, nor did I have any idea what PCP was. So I followed up on this and discovered the threat index and gave a paper in Breukelen, Holland, in 1979. Somebody in the audience at a previous presentation on my master's thesis in the U.K. said, "That was interesting, but why didn't you do it properly?" That was nice feedback on my presentation, but I didn't know what I wasn't doing properly. So I began to look at personal construct psychology and the result was my Breukelen paper (with Glenys Parry). However, I come at PCP as a philosopher, but one who had been touched by a personal family member having a serious mental illness. I discovered, as a psychologist with a first-class honors degree, that I knew nothing whatsoever about applied psychology/clinical psychology. And so I did a master's degree in clinical psychology and that's where I was able to get into personal construct psychology more comprehensively. What impressed me most about it was that it was the only psychology I found that met my objections as a philosopher to the relative shallowness and superficiality of most of what passed for psychology—with the exception, to that point in time, of psychoanalytic theory, which I had studied in philosophy because in psychology it was not considered "scientific." When I opened the pages of George Kelly's (1955/1991a, 1955/1991b) book, there was an attempt in the first chapter to articulate in detail the relationship between PCP and common philosophical systems, or fields of questions, I was seeking. That sort of threatened me intellectually in relation to my outlook on psychology. However, when I was working with my clients, it gave me a phenomenological-existential-humanist approach, wherein my client was not seen as an object to be treated but as a person to share a journey with—a journey into an interiority, as Sartre might say, one that's a psychology of the individual (albeit a situated individual) and more interested in the idiographic than the nomothetic. So it was an accident. I was happy with its philosophical integrity, and it gave me a way to work with clients that didn't offend my particular social, egalitarian, political, ethical, and artistic views formed in my studies in philosophy.

### PCP, RC, AND SC: POINTS OF DIVERGENCE AND CONTACT

#### Internal vs. External Emphases

**RASKIN:** There's an interesting distinction between the internal emphasis of radical constructivism and personal construct psychology compared to the external emphasis

of social constructionism. Is there some way you can articulate the distinction that you see here, Sheila?

MCNAMEE: I think the distinction is obvious. But what I would say, going back, is that I really like the word *promiscuous*, which has nothing to do with sexuality. It has to do with mixing things up. There are times when you're dealing with someone—whether it's in therapy, in life, or in any form of interaction—when thinking in a radical constructivist way and orienting oneself toward someone as, "This is who you are, and you're structure determined, and all I can do is try to perturb you in some way," can be a useful way of operating. But from my point of view, no one theory or way of describing things is the truth. I think of these as conversational resources; they are available for us to use. If I wanted to use a psychoanalytic discourse, if I wanted to use a cognitive discourse—all of those ways of being either resonate or don't. And so I feel there is so much more fluidity and flexibility when you orient that way.

RASKIN: I hope we'll come back to that later because my sense is that what you're saying is something that both Bill and Jay might agree with, and I know it is something that resonates for me. So if a more constructivist [as opposed to social constructionist] perspective is saying that in a different way, what is it that's different? Let's come back to that.

MCNAMEE: I would like to come back to that as well. I think we've come so far. About 20 years ago, from my point of view, there was a need for people to assert, "I am a constructivist, I am a constructionist." But yesterday, everything I listened to indicated that, "We're sort of in the same boat together."

EFRAN: So I want to share a quote from Heinz von Foerster. In explaining why he wanted to disassociate himself from the constructivist bandwagon, he says:

When people talk about constructivists, realists, objectivists, subjectivists, and postmodernists—and start using all this terminology—I just feel like saying, "Thank you, that will do, I'm off to the movies." That's way more interesting. Some people call themselves relativists or constructivists/deconstructivists. There's another group that has a sign that says postmodernism around their necks. Some bandwagons are motorized, others are moved by horsepower. They all rush around and the result is that, in the end, nobody listens to anyone anymore. (Foerster & Poerksen, 2002, p. 44)

RASKIN: In terms of thinking about what Sheila and Jay initially said, from your personal construct perspective, what would be your response to them?

WARREN: My first response to a social constructionist is that personal construct psychology is quite happy with it. PCP never, ever, ever said that there was no relationship, or personal relationships, or an outside world of other people. In fact, Jones' (1971) early review of PCP, as I remember, said that this was a social psychology. We have nothing to fear from social constructionism and its emphasis on interactions with people. So, in that respect, it's unremarkable. In terms of radical constructivism, I don't really understand that. From a philosophical perspective, I get uneasy about the sheer volume of words and ideas that appear for our reflection with so little time to properly do that reflection, especially when some are taken up with vigor and a "bandwagon" is generated; this worries philosophers. We have millions of words and an intellectual milieu that celebrates calculative thinking at

the expense of meditative thinking (Heidegger, 1959/1966). So I get uneasy about things changing so quickly with little time for proper evaluation.

### Knowledge as Personal and Private vs. Shared and Relational

RASKIN: So Jay, you are kind of interesting on this panel for many reasons. You trained and studied under Kelly, but then in more recent times you incorporated a lot of radical constructivism. It seems like a lot of people here in the audience feel that radical constructivism theories are the most “other” or confusing or least familiar. How might we help people with that a little bit, given that we can’t instruct their systems?

EFRAN: First of all, I have not abandoned PCP. What I liked is that Maturana approached all of this not as a philosopher but as a biologist. The radical piece of this doesn’t mean “way out” but instead means “thoroughly consistent.” So what I like is that through one set of consistent axioms and principles, Maturana is able to ground us perhaps better than some of the social science approaches have done. I don’t see it as foreclosing anything, including the various domains of discourse that Sheila is talking about, which would simply be different linguistic domains as far as Maturana is concerned. Maturana does start with the organism. Somebody asked him why he privileges the organism in his biology. He says that this is because if he hits the person over the head with a two-by-four the conversation stops. However, because he is committed to the notion of the centrality of language and the creation of observers (which means you must have two languaging beings in interaction), it does allow fully for the social aspects of life—the fact that we live in language and we observe each other and observe ourselves through each other. So Maturana simply adds an additional dimension to where I was with PCP.

RASKIN: In recent years, having spent a lot of time studying both Maturana and von Glasersfeld’s work, I have a similar response. Von Glasersfeld died in November of 2010, but the previous January I was able to visit with him at his home here in Massachusetts. He knew of Kelly’s work back in the 1960s and he liked Kelly’s work and felt that what he was doing was consistent with what Kelly had to say. I thought that was really, really interesting. But when I’ve brought that back to personal construct folks, I haven’t always found lots of responsiveness to von Glasersfeld’s work, which I think in some ways—in my read—is more consistent with PCP than social constructionism. Social constructionism, both for PCP and radical constructivism, poses some basic challenges that people have to decide how much to finagle, how much to argue about, and how much to just let be.

MCNAMEE: I wanted to say something about Maturana’s structure determinism. The real contribution I find liberating is that it positioned me, as a professional, in a very different way. I couldn’t make a client change. I can’t make my students learn. And that, I think, is a huge contribution. To realize that all we can do is invite. He says perturb, but I say invite. I think that is important as we think about what we do and who we are as professionals. And more importantly as we think about what are we doing when we train people. Are we teaching them to be

this old-fashioned idea of what an expert is? Yesterday we talked about a check list—I did this and I did that—but not about being responsive to people.

RASKIN: So in social constructionism, when we talk about discourses one of the places where the radical constructivists often take issue—as do personal construct psychologists, to a certain extent—is the issue of whether or not the discourse is really shared. Is it a shared discourse, or does each person have his or her own private understanding of that discourse? You hear that a lot: These discourses are sort of these things out there somehow that are impacting us. And social constructionists sometimes will say, “Well, the discourses inhabit us.” This suggests they get inside us, which I’m not sure is consistent with the idea that the discourses are somehow between us. So I get confused.

MCNAMEE: So I think the useful way of thinking about it is to start with the basics: We live in language. We can never step outside of language. Language by its very nature is a differentiating device. Once I say good, it’s not bad. Once I say right, it can’t be wrong. We are carving up and categorizing the world in every moment. Even to say something like, “What a nice day it is!” is an evaluation. It is hard not to put things into little boxes as we speak. When I say dominant discourse, those are “the oughts” and “the shoulds” we walk around with. They are nuanced and different for everybody, but they are still in language and language is still a relational and social element. We are born into language; we *live* into it. So in that way, this inside–outside dichotomy is collapsed yet there is still a uniqueness to each of us. There is nothing about social construction that says we’re all the same. I am the confluence of all of my relations and all of the conversations—real, imagined, and virtual—that I have been part of. And so one of the things about being human is that we have these vast repertoires, but usually we use such a minimal amount of them. What social transformation and personal transformation are all about is exploring resources—conversational resources—that we already have access to but just don’t use. All of this is to say that when we talk about discourses, *shared* is not a word I use. We don’t have shared meaning, we don’t have shared discourses, but we act as if we share them. They’re what we take for granted.

EFRAN: We’re in agreement that you live in language. Maturana’s metaphor for this is that it’s a social dance. The higher functions do not take place in the cortex. They take place in the community. So it is a choreography. Of course, you need a cortex to do it—to participate—but the choreography is in our action patterns.

RASKIN: So Bill, what do you think of this? I find myself thinking of sociality and Kelly, but there might be other things you think are worth throwing in here.

WARREN: This radical constructivism seems to me to potentially risk ending up in solipsism. That is, it’s just me and my mind. Dancing and perturbing are interesting metaphors. But it seems to me that philosophers were looking at things and words that related to things. In PCP we take it to the next level. If I say, “This is a table,” we might have an epistemological discussion about whether this is a table, or whether it is anything at all. You listen to me and get bored, but then I say, “This table was made by my father and I loved him deeply.” You’re suddenly listening. I am suddenly interesting. I am suddenly human, suddenly alive. When philosophers talk about words and things there comes talk about meanings. If

the various meanings are incommensurate with one another and we hold to our respective positions, then we move into relativism. So solipsism and relativism make me anxious, because I don't have any constructs for dealing with those things.

EFRAN: He's experiencing threat just like Kelly (1969).

## RELATIVISM

RASKIN: What about relativism? That's always interesting to me (Raskin, 2001). Am I interested in relativism? I guess it all depends (ha ha!). All of these approaches under the constructivist banner get regularly told they are a bunch of relativists, and if you endorse any of the things that these approaches say, then we're going to end up in some terrible morass. What responses do radical constructivists and social constructionists have to this?

MCNAMEE: What's the alternative to relativism? It's universalism. I have a little cheat sheet for explaining social construction to people. It's really easy. People come together and coordinate. I use the example of my seminars where, on the first day, there are 20 people sitting around the table. The second time we meet, they are all sitting in the same places. Nobody sat on each other. They know how to coordinate. From our coordinations, we quickly establish a pattern, a ritual. At the fourth meeting, someone who decides to add the class arrives early and sits in your seat—and you say, "Hey!"

RASKIN: I was the student who used to do that.

MCNAMEE: So, standards and expectations emerge from these ritualized coordinations. And then we have expectations and beliefs: "This is the way that it should be." "This is how it is." Those beliefs and values feed into our future coordinations. Now, if you think about how many coordinated activities we engage in every day, why would we ever imagine that people have the same values and beliefs? So the issue is not how to figure out what is true or right; and it's not rampant relativism (you know, anything goes) because we are bound by each other. These are values and beliefs—entire world views—that are made, not found. They are made with each other. So there's always a standard, but the standard is always within a particular set of relations. So it's relativist but not rampant relativism.

RASKIN: Is relativism the same as anything goes? I'm not sure that they are the same. Jay, do you have any relative thoughts on the topic?

EFRAN: For Maturana, language is a second order coordination of action. First order is coordination of action. Then, coordination of coordinations is where language comes in. It is certainly not the case that anything goes. I don't know what you mean by relativism, but I don't see in Maturana a concern about relativism. Not only do words have meanings but there are no synonyms in Maturana's system. If there were true synonyms, one word would vanish as being unnecessary. Each word that is retained represents a unique coordination of actions (or, more accurately, a coordination of coordination of actions). What we distinguish as a

- table remains distinguished as a table in the community that distinguishes it as a table. It never becomes a chair. So I'm not sure what the fuss over relativism is. So then let's throw it back to Bill, because he's the one who brought it up.
- RASKIN: So then let's throw it back to Bill, because he's the one who brought it up.
- WARREN: It seems that human beings have some sort of drive, some sort of need, some sort of quest to overcome what is merely comfortable; [to arrive at that which] gives me something I can ground my life in—a sense of “this is shared.” . . . It's that we have this human need to get some grounded knowledge. . . . It's not about objectivity. It's about *objecting*, as I have elaborated elsewhere (Warren, 1994). We keep wanting to lift ourselves above subjectivity to get a sense that this is more than just, “Bill Warren likes it.” It's more than just Bill Warren clicks with Sheila or Jay on it. It's more than that. It's got to have some universality. Language games and different sorts of discourses are all fun, but they're still peripheral to this quest that seems to be part of the human being. There's something more differentiated (idiographic, objecting), yet at the same time more grounded. PCP has, for me, this joint focus.
- EFRAN: I am trying to place what you're saying in a framework that makes sense to me. For Maturana, we live in a series of multiverses, not one universe. All multiverses are legitimate because they can be distinguished. Also, the human being is the ultimate reference point, which I think is close to what you are saying; that certain things are of concern to us because of how we, as human beings, need to live—and those are fundamental. If we were butterflies, we would have a different set of fundamentals.
- WARREN: You know Maturana. I don't. When people say “Maturana says,” I say, “Who is Maturana?” That is what philosophers do. Just because someone says it doesn't make it true. Someone articulates a comprehensive theory; it still doesn't make it true. It has to be subjected to critical scrutiny, *a la* Socrates. If it can get through, then it will have credibility—a proximity to the *objecting* we are trying to get.
- EFRAN: Maturana's claim is that he is speaking not as a philosopher—although there is some overlap with what some philosophers have said—but . . . as a scientist and a biologist. He is starting with two problems—namely, that we operate in language and we are the observers—and we have to both explain those facts and use those facts in our explanations; and he claims to have set up a system that is thoroughly consistent and in which he doesn't draw on objectivity in any way, shape, or form to make the claims he is making. That is the terrain he has staked out.
- WARREN: The objectivity is in what he is *doing*. It is not an external thing where you can make a comparison. From the little I know of Maturana, he sounds much like Hegel. If there's something working itself out in history, there's growth toward greater and greater sociality; toward *greater self-awareness as a species*.
- RASKIN: I never saw Maturana as thinking there was a particular directionality in the ongoing development of a living system. It just goes on for the sake of going on. It's not headed anywhere in particular.
- WARREN: For Hegel, it's teleology. It's drawing forth to some ultimate conscious self-awareness in me and my species.

- EFRAN: For Maturana, life is a natural drift. Picture a boat without oars. Its path is determined by the waves, the wind, and the shape of the boat until the boat doesn't exist anymore. So we're like that boat, but we tell good stories about the journey.
- RASKIN: Going back to the relativism idea, relativism just strikes me as fairly boring and uneventful, if all you're saying is that your understanding is relative to where you are standing. That is, even if we agree this is a table, we're all sitting at different points around the table, and so your perspective on the table is relative to where you're sitting and mine is relative to mine. So what I make of this table and what my take on it is may be different than yours. If I sit up and lean on the table and the table tips, what might be viable and workable for me at that particular moment in terms of that table may be different than for you, because maybe I'm trying not to have the table fall on me and you're trying not to have your coffee spill in your lap. So our understandings and constructions may be relative to the particular event. That might be a mundane example, but more abstract examples may be similar. When people start saying, "Oh, you're a willy-nilly relativist," I get confused because I don't just believe any old thing. I believe what I believe because it seems to be working, and if it stops working, I will need to change it. Of course, you may think that what I am doing is not working and I may think it is, but that is a whole other discussion. The "anything goes" thing throws me off. I don't feel like an anything goes kind of person.
- WARREN: Relativism has to do with your perspective on an object. If you break the table, I'll be upset because my father made it. That's relative to *me*. The relative perspectives we have on the table's existence *as such* is what epistemologists struggle with. Psychology can't answer these fundamental questions if it is itself trapped in its own discourse. Husserl's (1913/1962) point is that psychology can't give us knowledge of the fundamental structures of the universe. It can't even question itself.
- RASKIN: I am curious about what other people think of personal construct psychology, because I don't see radical constructivism and PCP as that different on this point. I think other people may. If my understanding of radical constructivism fits with yours, Jay, then when it comes to this table, we don't know it. We know our understanding of it. Does that sound fair?
- EFRAN: First, I'd like to say that his father makes very nice tables. Things are distinctions in language. No language, no things. Does that do it for you?
- RASKIN: Von Glasersfeld says (and I know I'm not supposed to do that, because Bill doesn't like it when we say somebody else says something) that we don't know the table itself, but we have a representation—an understanding of the table—that is internal to us. So the table perturbs or triggers or invites us to understand it in a particular way, and we do that based on our structure.
- EFRAN: The table becomes the medium with which we exist.
- RASKIN: I try to explain it this way: You're in college and you're up late at night talking to your friends and having "deep" conversations. And one of you has a cat, and somebody in the room says, "Hey man! Does the beer bottle look the same to the cat as it does to us?" You know that conversation, the one you usually have

at about 3 a.m. that goes on for two hours? And in some ways, that fits with the radical constructivist perspective. The cat's eyes are built differently. Its whole biology is somewhat different than a human's. The cat experiences the table based on its structure, and all it knows is what its structure tells it about the table. At some point in that conversation you actually get to humans: "Well, if the cat sees the table differently than you do, how do I know that you see the table the same as I do?" And then you get into that, but eventually you all pass out, so it doesn't matter anymore. That is very interesting to me because we know things through our structure. That to me also fits very nicely with things in personal construct psychology and it can fit with social construction, but in a way that's a little more complicated.

### REALITY, MATHEMATICS, AND GOING ON TOGETHER

- MCNAMEE: You know I'm listening to this conversation and I'm thinking I'm not interested in what our basic human purpose in life is. I like Wittgenstein's question, "How do we go on together?" And that's what I see that we're doing moment to moment: working things out. And that requires a whole variety of moral orders. There can never be one answer. That's the more fundamental issue we need to be looking at. Yes, the fact that the cat sees the beer bottle differently, that's not problematic to me. That is not anything goes either, not by a long shot. If you want to use Maturana's terms, it's structure determinism. Or you can talk about these culturally and discursively constructed ways of seeing the world. And we can step in and out of different discourses. That's the key to successful living, the ability to do that. And that's the answer to, "How do we go on together?"
- WARREN: I'm starting to hate this table! I'm starting to hate my father, as well! Is the discourse of mathematics different in Australia, Czechoslovakia, Russia, England, America? Two plus two is four; 180 degrees constitutes the sum of the angles of a triangle. There are certain foundations and fundamental objective realities with discourses aside that need to be the same. It would be pretty bizarre if you said, "Two plus two is seven," unless you are talking about a different number system. This is the problem of psychologism: You can't get it out of psychology. You have to step out of psychological discourses and look at things with a "bracketing" (Husserl, 1913/1962). That is, ask yourself, "How much of what I'm saying is because I am a man? Just because I'm Australian? Just because I'm 27 years old?"
- MCNAMEE: What I want to say is that there is no denial of a physical or material world by any social constructionist, unless they don't really know what they're talking about (and there are a lot of those around). There is a physical world, but the physical, material world is meaningless until we name it. And so we can't step out of discourse. We're always in some discourse. We cannot step out of language. That is part of the human condition. So, what we want to explore is, whose standards shall apply? Who has the right to name it this way?
- RASKIN: Bill does.

- MCNAMEE: And where does that take us? It becomes a deconstructive process wherein we collaboratively reconstruct something that's livable for us together, if starting from two different places. How do we pull apart the boat? I heard yesterday the word *tension* used a lot. There's a communication scholar named John Stewart. Drawing on Buber, he gives a beautiful definition of dialogue. He says it's an ethical, tensional practice, and the tension is between holding one's own ground while at the same time letting the other "happen to you." We are never going to have agreement. We're always going to have incommensurate discourses. How do we hold that dialogic space where we're curious about the other rather than quick to assert that our own perspective is right? I think we've come a long way in about 20 or 30 years. There are so many points of connection that are useful rather than holding onto, "My theory is the right theory." I think it's a way of being.
- RASKIN: Going back to mathematics—yes, mathematics works, but is it because of the world or because of human structure? If all human beings can understand mathematics and certain things in mathematics are right and wrong, how much of that is a product of our structure organizing information and understanding the world and how much of it is because of what's out there? Obviously it's a mix. Could there be creatures from another planet who would come here and have a different mathematics that we can't even comprehend because our structures are so different? Sort of like a toaster toasts and a washer washes—we understand math a certain way because of the way we're built.
- EFRAN: Maturana explicitly says that science is not a description of an objective world. It's a way of living together. So our mathematics is a way of living together and, presumably, if we were structured a bit differently, we'd have a different mathematics.
- RASKIN: All those junior high school students are wishing that right about now.
- EFRAN: Back to what Sheila is saying, that does open the door to the issue of morality, because we embrace science because we kind of like that way of living together. Presumably we can find many different ways of living together, but the question is, which do we choose?
- RASKIN: Doesn't that bring us back to Bill's concern about relativism? Are we putting science potentially on par with other perspectives we might think are not as legitimate or correct or reasonable?
- WARREN: The original root word for science in the ancient Greek world was *inquiry*; that is the basic thing that human beings do. Maturana says that science is our discourse; we choose it because it gets us there another way. The discourse of mathematics sees a left-wing view of mathematics versus a right-wing view of mathematics; it is a game we made up that actually works most of the time, or it is the reality of the fundamental structure and function of the world. The antirealist position would say, "Yes, but it is mathematics (or anything we are talking about) that we are talking about." For me, social constructionism and personal construct psychology are usefully viewed in terms of Carroll's (1974) metaphor of two searchlights illuminating the same field but from different perspectives, or perhaps with different intentions. In my take on this, for example, the searchlight that is the

coach of one team playing on that field will illuminate different things than does that of the other team's coach. As a clinical psychologist interested in my client's problems, personal construct psychology—with its focus of convenience being clinical psychology—is simply more useful.

## REFERENCES

- Bateson, G. (1979). *Mind and nature: A necessary unity*. New York: Dutton.
- Carroll, J. (1974). *Breakout from the Crystal Palace*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Dell, P. F. (1985). Understanding Bateson and Maturana: Toward a biological foundation for the social sciences. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 11, 1–20.
- Efran, J. S., & Fauber, R. L. (1995). Radical constructivism: Questions and answers. In R. A. Neimeyer & M. J. Mahoney (Eds.), *Constructivism in psychotherapy* (pp. 275–304). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Efran, J. S., & Lukens, M. D. (1985, May/June). The world according to Humberto Maturana. *Family Therapy Networker*, 23–28, 72–75.
- Efran, J. S., Lukens, M. D., & Lukens, R. J. (1990). *Language, structure, and change: Frameworks of meaning in psychotherapy*. New York: Norton.
- Foerster, H. von, & Poerksen, B. (2002). *Understanding systems: Conversations on epistemology and ethics*. Heidelberg: Carl-Auer.
- Glaserfeld, E. von. (1995). *Radical constructivism: A way of knowing and learning*. London: Falmer Press.
- Heidegger, M. (1966). *Discourse on thinking* (J. M. Anderson, Trans.). New York: Harper & Row. (Original work published 1959.)
- Husserl, E. (1962). *Ideas: General introduction to pure phenomenology* (W. R. Boyce Gibson, Trans.). New York: Collier Books. (Original work published 1913, original in German.)
- Jones, H. G. (1971). In search of an ideographic psychology. *Bulletin of the British Psychological Society*, 24, 279–290.
- Kelly, G. A. (1969). The threat of aggression. In B. Maher (Ed.), *Clinical psychology and personality: The selected papers of George Kelly* (pp. 281–288). New York: Wiley.
- Kelly, G. A. (1991a). *The psychology of personal constructs: Vol. 1. A theory of personality*. London: Routledge. (Original work published 1955.)
- Kelly, G. A. (1991b). *The psychology of personal constructs: Vol. 2. Clinical diagnosis and psychotherapy*. London: Routledge. (Original work published 1955.)
- Maturana, H. R., & Varela, F. J. (1992). *The tree of knowledge: The biological roots of human understanding* (R. Paolucci, Trans.; rev. ed.). Boston: Shambhala.
- McNamee, S. (1996). Psychotherapy as social construction. In H. Rosen & K. T. Kuehlwein (Eds.), *Constructing reality: Meaning-making perspectives for psychotherapists* (pp. 115–137). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- McNamee, S. (2004). Relational bridges between constructionism and constructivism. In J. D. Raskin & S. K. Bridges (Eds.), *Studies in meaning 2: Bridging the personal and social in constructivist psychology* (pp. 37–50). New York: Pace University Press.
- McNamee, S., & Hosking, D. M. (2012). *Research and social change: A relational constructionist approach*. New York: Routledge.
- McNamee, S., & Gergen, K. J. (Eds.). (1992). *Therapy as social construction*. London: Sage.
- Raskin, J. D. (2001). On relativism in constructivist psychology. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, 14, 285–313. doi: 10.1080/107205301750433414
- Raskin, J. D. (2002). Constructivism in psychology: Personal construct psychology, radical constructivism, and social constructionism. *American Communication Journal*, 5(3). Retrieved from <http://www.ac-journal.org>
- Warren, B. (1992). Subjecting and objecting in personal construct psychology. In A. Thomson & P. Cummins (Eds.), *European perspectives in personal construct psychology* (pp. 57–66). Lincoln, NE: European Personal Construct Association.
- Warren, B. (1998). *Philosophical dimensions of personal construct psychology*. London: Routledge.

Copyright of Journal of Constructivist Psychology is the property of Psychology Press (UK) and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.