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<b>Authors(s)</b>	Carr, Alan
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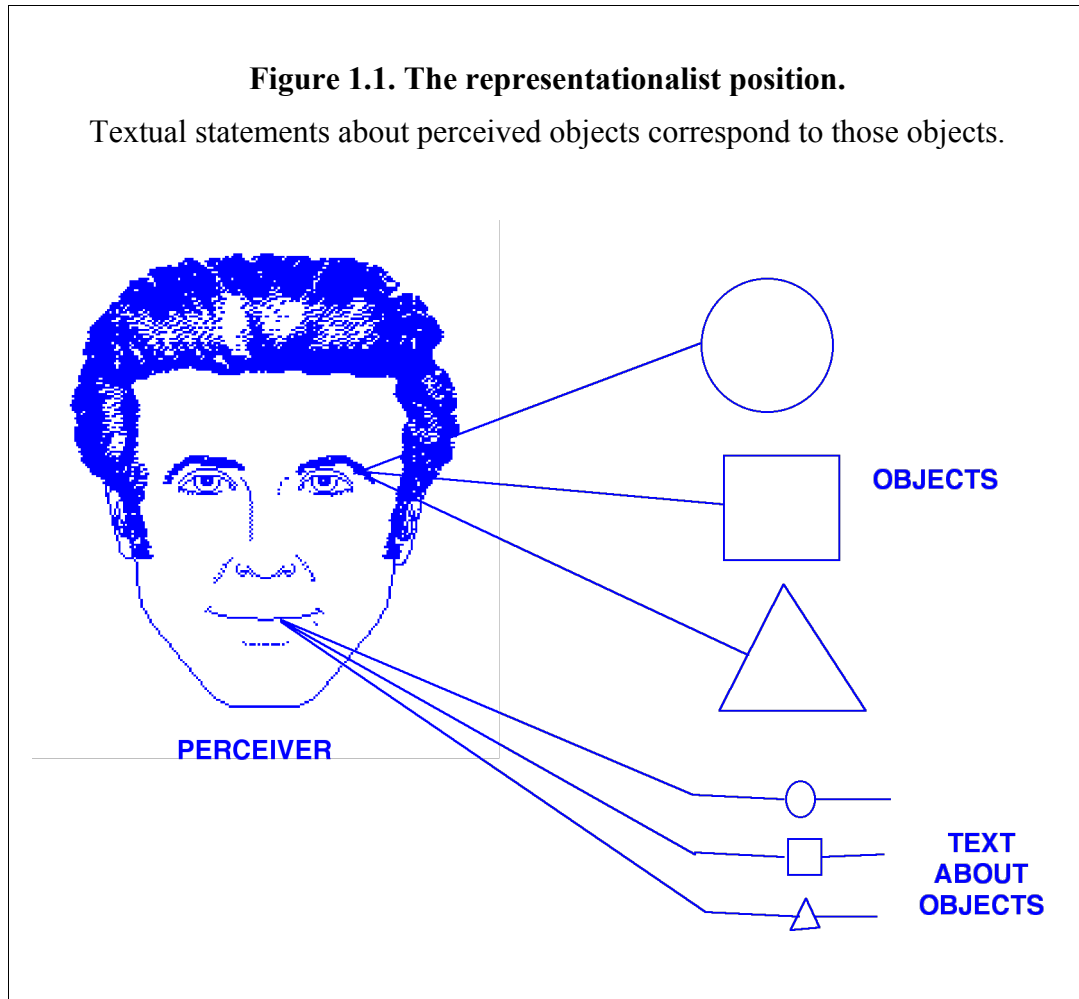
## **CHAPTER 1**

### **KEN KERGEN'S ARGUMENT FOR SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM**

*Alan Carr*

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Within the field of family therapy many have embraced social constructionism as a guiding framework for both clinical work and research (Carr, 2000). This move towards social constructionism has been influenced by the arguments of the psychologist Ken Gergen. Gergen who has argued cogently that social constructionism is the only viable alternative for social sciences such as psychology, since representationalism has been shown to be untenable. His arguments hold good for practice and research within the field of family therapy also. In this chapter, Gergen's three criticisms of the representationalist position in academic psychology are first set out. This is followed by a consideration of the implications for psychology and family therapy of discarding a representationalist position in favour of a social constructionist stance. This paper was written after Ken Gergen spoke to a full house at UCD on June 20th 1996.



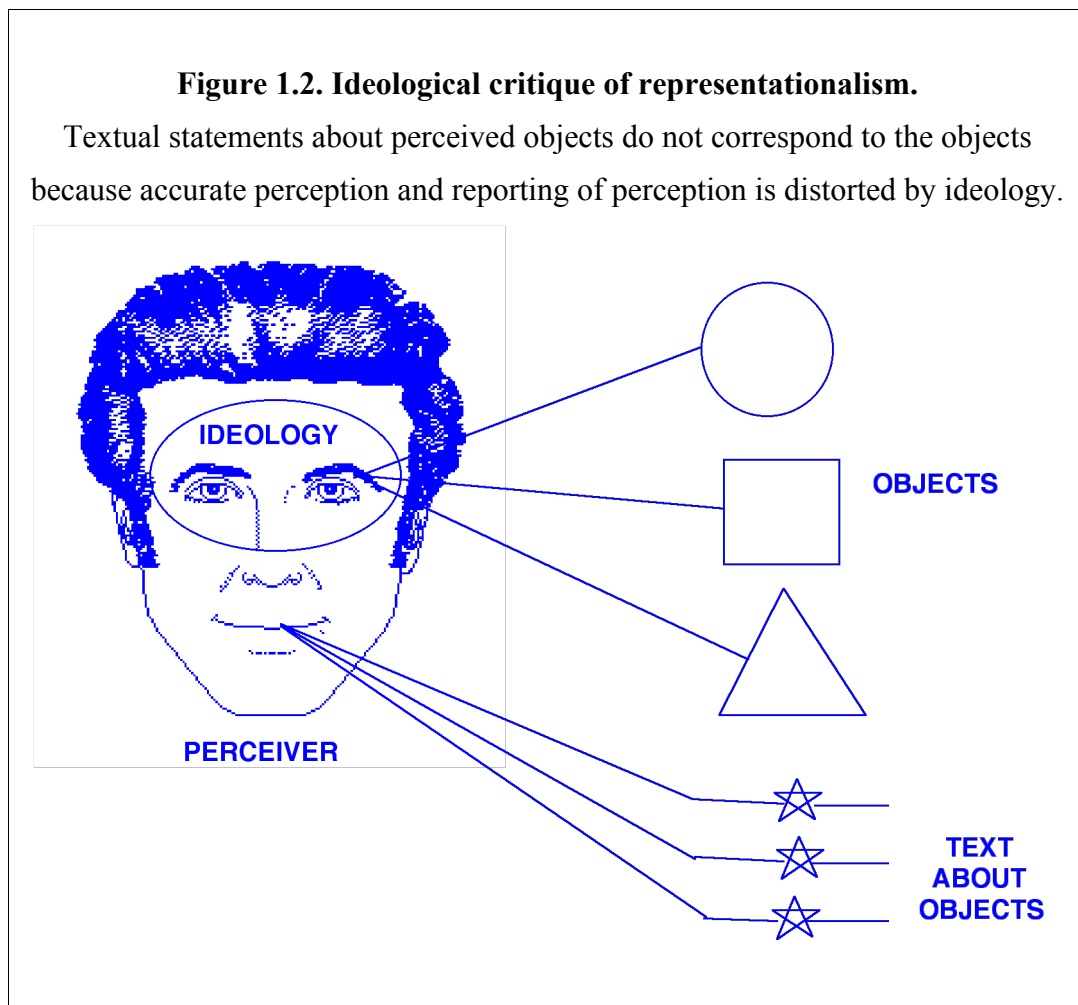
### THE REPRESENTATIONALIST POSITION

A diagram of the representationalists' position as set out in Figure 1. This position assumes that a person or perceiver obtains knowledge about objects through the senses. This knowledge is received in the form of sensory perceptions which bear a mirror-like or photograph-like relation to the real objects they represent. When perceivers talk or write textual statements about objects, based on their knowledge of reality, these textual statements bear a map-

like correspondence to the objects they describe. This representationalist position underpins the empirical approach taken in mainstream psychology throughout much of the English speaking world, but particularly the US and the UK. (Incidentally, it is also the position taken by mainstream clinical psychology, social work, psychiatry and some schools of family therapy notably structural and behavioural family therapy). Mainstream empirical psychology is part of a broader movement often referred to as modernism which began with the enlightenment. A central tenet of modernism is that if scientists strive to gain more and more accurate observations of objects using more and more refined instruments and methods and translate these into textual statements, a body of scientific knowledge will gradually develop which because of its accuracy, objectivity and thoroughness will lead to a better world. Ken Gergen argues that science in general, and mainstream psychology in particular, has not helped humanity to forge brave new world. This has led to a questioning of the modernist project. For mainstream academic empirical psychology, Ken Gergen neatly collapses critiques of representationalism into three broad categories.

- The ideological critique
- The literary-rhetorical critique
- The social critique

The central concerns of each of these critiques are given below.



### THE IDEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE

The ideological criticism of representationalism is diagrammed in Figure 2. Ideological critics of representationalism argue that textual statements about objects do not bear a map-like correspondence to them. This is because all people, including empirical psychologists, perceive objects through the lens of ideology. With modern sciences, including empirical psychology, this lens is typically that of capitalism. The lens also privileges the position of white, middle-class males and marginalizes the position of non-white people, people who are

lower-class and also the position of women. Textual statements which make up the body of scientific knowledge within mainstream empirical psychology is therefore not objective knowledge. Rather it is a biased and prejudiced collection of opinions. This ideological criticism of modernism is well represented by the work of Habermas (1981) and the feminist critique of science (Mary Gergen, 1988).

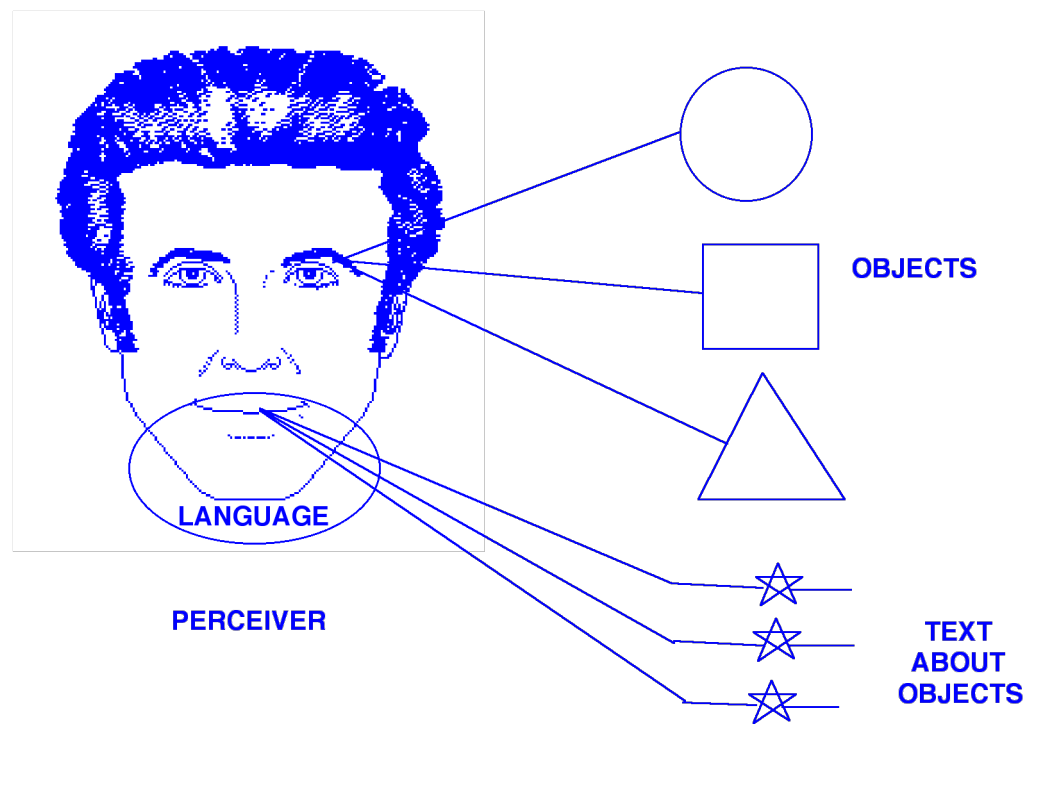
The biased nature of observations within biology has been humorously illustrated by Ken Gergen when he referred (at his lecture in UCD in 1996) to possible metaphors biologists might use in describing sperms fertilising eggs. The metaphor of the thrusting sperm and the passive egg was contrasted with an alternative metaphor of helpless sperms being drawn in by a powerful yet selective magical pull from the egg.

### **THE LITERARY-RHETORICAL CRITIQUE**

The literary-rhetorical criticism of the representationalist position was next addressed. It is diagrammed in Figure 3. The central argument here, is that textual statements about perceived objects do not correspond to those objects because all textual statements are determined more by language and its conventions than by the objects being described. Language is a closed self-referential system with every textual statement being related to every other statement. When a scientist observes objects in the world and describes these, his account is not an objective reflection of observed objects, but a narrative account given within the context of a textual history of the culture within which the scientist is working. So empirical psychology is no more than a rhetorical narrative written and spoken by scientists within a scientific community. It has its own language and textual history which in turn is bounded by the culture within which the community of scientists conduct their dialogue. Derrida (1976) is an important exponent of this position.

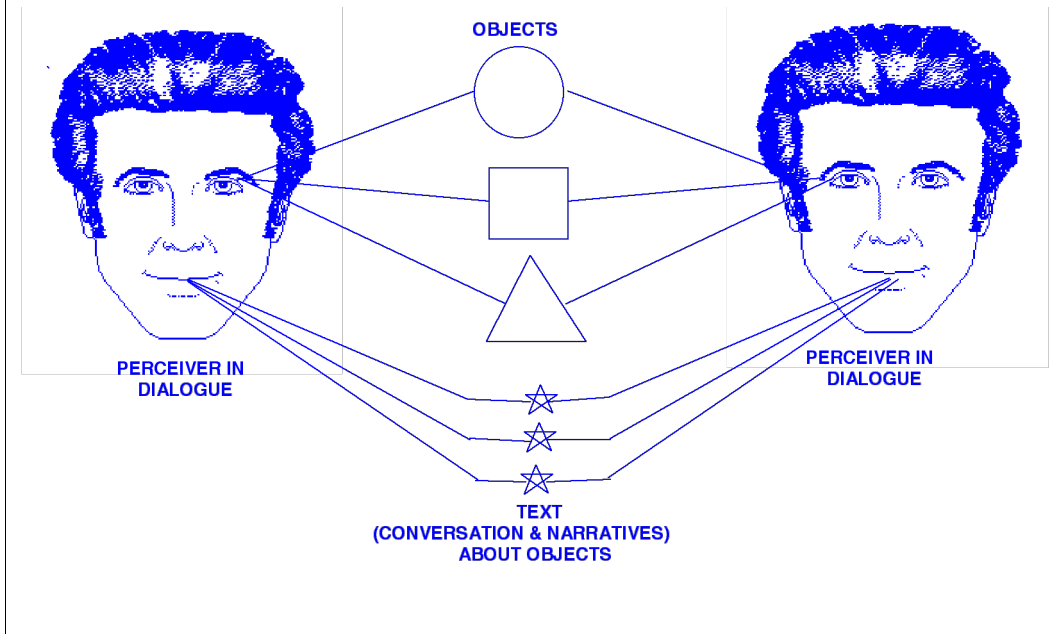
**Figure 1.3. Literary rhetorical critique of representationalism.**

Textual statements about perceived objects do not correspond to those objects because all textual statements are determined more by language and text than by the objects being described.



**Figure 1.4. Social critique of representationalist position.**

Textual statements about perceived objects do not correspond to those objects because they are determined more by the social context within which the statements are made than by the perceived objects.



**THE SOCIAL CRITIQUE**

Following on from the literary-rhetorical critique of representationalism, comes the third and final critique of the foundationalist position. The argument here moves from a focus on language as a determinant of scientific knowledge to language-users as a social community and the impact of the social process of this community on the development of scientific knowledge. The argument here is

that textual statements about objects are determined more by the social process and the social context within which the scientist works than by the objects being studied. Empirical psychologists conduct research on particular topics using particular methods because these fit with the activities of their scientific peers and sponsors. These scientific peers read and write for the same journals and teach in the same types of university departments using the same types of conceptual frameworks and language. The sponsors fund particular types of research that conforms to particular criteria and so scientists work within the constraints of these criteria. Graduate students wishing to pursue a scientific career conform to their academic supervisor's and university departments expectation to get good grades for their work. Thus social processes involving peers and sponsors lead empirical psychologist to conform to the conventions of their scientific community by selecting topics and methods that conform to the communities expectations. Conducting research projects that do not conform to particular substantive or methodological criteria while permitted, entails risks of being extruded form the scientific community with consequent loss of Belongingness, status and financial rewards. Furthermore, scientific communities are not even handed in the way research results enter into the ongoing dialogue of the scientific community which is conducted in the journals and at scientific conferences. Research findings that are at variance with the beliefs of the scientific community are rarely published and often those that fit with the scientific communities expectations are rarely replicated. This social criticism of representationalism is well represented by Kuhn's (1970) seminal work on the *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Ken Gergen argues in line with Kuhn, that significant new scientific knowledge arises not from the accumulation of objective facts using a specific method but from a shift in the conceptual framework used to make sense of scientists dialogues with each other about their observations.

### **WHITHER ACADEMIC PSYCHOLOGY?**

In the light of this critique, the question of what psychologists and family therapists should do and what the science of psychology should be about was posed. Four possible avenues of fruitful enquiry have been suggested by Ken Gergen.

- Continue empirical work but within a pragmatic frame of reference
- Subject modernist scientific narratives to cultural and historical analysis
- Explore the ethical implications of choosing particular lines of inquiry and scientific frames of reference
- Analyse issues such as identity or emotions within a social-constructionist rather than an individualistic framework.

### **EMPIRICAL RESEARCH FOR PRAGMATIC PURPOSES**

The post-modernist position adopted by Ken Gergen does not entail an abandonment of empirical work but a recognition of the limits of the truth claims that can be made about the results of such work. Psychologists and family therapists should continue to conduct empirical work but with an acceptance that the fruits of such work offers no more than pragmatic solutions to local problems. Empirical work cannot throw light on universal truths or contribute to a grand narrative.

Within the field of psychotherapy quantitative and qualitative, process and outcome research will not lead to a grand narrative about how change occurs in therapy or which therapies will always lead to problem resolution. However, this type of research may lead to many useful findings about which types of therapies work with which types of clients in particular socio-cultural contexts. The more rigorous this research is in the traditional modernist sense of the word, the more useful and the less ambiguous the local narratives will be. Evaluation

therapeutic change from multiple-perspectives including the views of clients, therapists referring agents and so forth would be an important emphasis for such research on therapy. This is because it would throw light on how constructs such as improvement or deterioration are socially constructed by the community of people involved in the therapeutic venture. (A similar position has been taken by the most rigorous empirical researchers in the field of family therapy, although often for different reasons (Sprenkle & Bailey, 1995)).

### **CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL CONSTRUCTS**

Psychologists and family therapists should recognize that many of the modernist frameworks we use in psychology and family therapy are culture-bound and explore the cultural and historical factors that have led to their development.

Ken Gergen has pointed out that the cultural and historical critique of accepted and reified constructs has clear implications for the practice of therapy, and in particular family therapy. Dominant pathologizing narratives about particular problems can be deconstructed through exploration of beliefs and practices within the families micro-culture. These can be explored in such a way that clients come to view them as no more than social-constructions that have been selected for reasons of habit or coherence. (I suggested that another common reason might be personal survival or survival of the family group but, I think this view was not shared by Ken Gergen). In the longer term, the goal of therapy, according to Ken Gergen is not to replace *a bad old narrative* with *a good new one*. No, for Ken Gergen the goal of therapy is to help clients reach a position that they can adopt multiple narratives about problems depending upon the context in which they find themselves. This broader meta-narrative offers clients a new freedom to escape from the constraints of belief systems inherent in family micro-cultures which either construct problems or prevent their resolution.

### **ETHICAL AWARENESS.**

Psychologists and family therapists should accept that scientific enquiry is not value-free, since the scientific dialogues and narratives we choose to create ultimately have ethical implications. In the study of therapy, the implication of Ken Gergen's position is that there is an onus on all therapists to examine the ethical implications of particular styles of interviewing. Are those which bring forth deficit narratives as ethical as those that bring forth narratives about competencies? This is the central ethical question. Arising from it are other important questions such as under what circumstances are clinical interviewing styles that focus on deficits ethical? Is there a case to be made for a temporary focus on deficits in risk evaluation in cases of domestic violence, child abuse or suicide risk?

### **NEW WORLDS FOR OLD**

According to Ken Gergen, psychologists and theorists within the field of family therapy should create new discursive resources arising out of the central ideas of social constructionism. For example, rather than conceptualizing people as self-contained repositories of cognition, emotion, motivation and self-identity, we should explore the potential of reconceptualizing identities, emotions motivations and so forth as socially constructed within a matrix of social relationships. This style of thinking is common currency among most family therapists trained in the systemic tradition but is quite alien to most academic psychologists.

### **THE UNANSWERED DILEMMAS**

The social constructionist position is not without its dilemmas and paradoxes. Two deserve mention. The first is the dilemma concerning personal responsibility: *If self is a social construction how can a self be ethically responsible for his or her violent actions and how can there be justice?* The second problem is the paradox about the truth value of the social constructionist position *If all theories are social constructions, is not social-constructionism just another social construction.*

### SUMMARY

Gergen has highlighted three critiques of representationalism. The representationalist position, which underpins the empirical approach taken in mainstream psychology and much of first order family therapy, assumes that statements bear a map-like correspondence to the objects they describe. The ideological critique of representationalism argues that statements about objects do not correspond to the objects because accurate perception and reporting of perception is distorted by ideology. The literary-rhetorical critique of representationalism points out that statements about perceived objects do not correspond to those objects because all statements are determined more by language and than by the objects being described. In the social critique of representationalism, it is argued that statements about objects do not correspond to those objects because they are determined more by the social context within which the statements are made than by the perceived objects. Modern psychology and much of first order family therapy and traditional mental health practices which is based on representationalism must change its focuses and in future continue empirical work but within a pragmatic frame of reference; subject modernist scientific narratives to cultural and historical analysis; explore the ethical implications of choosing particular lines of inquiry and scientific frames

of reference; and analyze issues such as identity or emotions within a social-constructionist rather than an individualistic framework.

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