

Marx and Wittgenstein: Social Praxis and Social Explanation

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The Estrangement of Social Constructionism and Experimental Social Psychology: History of the Rift and Prospects for Reconciliation

John T. Jost
Stanford University

Arie W. Kruglanski
University of Maryland, College Park

Social constructionism and experimental social psychology represent two complementary paradigms for understanding human social behavior, but over the last quarter century they have remained oddly and unnecessarily estranged from one another. In this article, we trace the history of social constructionist thought and find that the intellectual lineage and guiding assumptions of these two subcultures of social psychology are essentially the same. Next, we clarify the philosophical and ideological bases of their divide to determine how wide the rift really is. Although the differences may appear to be unbridgeable, we argue that a rapprochement is both possible and desirable. At the level of meta-theory, Donald Campbell and William J. McGuire have demonstrated that constructionist and empirical insights can be usefully integrated in social psychology. At the level of empirical research, studies of the situated self-concept, social identity, collective representation, attitudes as temporary constructions, communication and shared reality, and cultural psychology have progressed through the incorporation of constructionist themes. Similar opportunities await researchers who explore the contextual bases of history, ideology, and other shared systems of meaning and their implications for social psychology. Finally, we identify some substantive and stylistic complementarities of social constructionism and experimental social psychology and analyze their joint potential for contributing to a well-balanced discipline of social psychology that is worthy of both parts of its name.

"In our father's house there are many rooms."
(W. J. McGuire, 1973, p. 452)

For more than a quarter of a century, the subject matter of social psychology has been approached from two conceptual vantage points that have remained oddly and unnecessarily estranged from one another. These are *experimental social psychology* and *social constructionism*. Mainstream social psychology has been largely dominated by experimentalists who see their own methods as providing the best (and perhaps only) way of garnering cumulative knowledge about

human social behavior. In the most recent *Handbook of Social Psychology*, Aronson, Wilson, and Brewer (1998) refer to experimentation as "the workhorse of social psychological research" and "the chief method of choice for social psychology" (p. 100). They suggest that being an experimental social psychologist is both a blessing and a curse and that "part of the blessing is that experimental social psychologists are able to use their knowledge and skill to perform the appropriate research to test hypotheses ... in a solid and ... convincing manner" (p. 100). The curse is that methodological sophistication "keeps us from rejoicing" at "potentially meaningless data" (pp. 99–100).

Social constructionists object to the notion that any particular set of methods offers an epistemologically privileged view of reality. Although Gergen's (1999) *An Invitation to Social Construction* offers no definition of the book's central term, he makes clear that "a chief aim of constructionist inquiry" is to do away with "the mantle of scientific authority" (p. 52). Within social psychology, the constructionist movement is less clearly associated with its own set of methods or postulates than it is with the rejection of scientific approaches

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Requests for reprints should be sent to John T. Jost, Graduate School of Business, Stanford University, Stanford, CA 94305.
E-mail: Jost_John@gsb.stanford.edu

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