

**The Lecture Contains:**

- 'Crisis' in Psychology and the Need for Alternative Paradigms (continued...)
- How Kenneth Gergen Realized the Limitations of Psychological Experiments
- Premises and challenges associated with the social constructionist paradigm of social psycholog

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### **'Crisis' in Psychology and the Need for Alternative Paradigms (continued...)**

- Let us take a look at how McGarty and Haslam (1997, pp. 12-13) explain such a meaning of 'crisis' in social psychology,

“ . . . the 1960s saw the start of what has come to be referred to as the crisis in social psychology. The crisis stemmed from attempts to apply the methods of social psychology to an examination of social psychological research. This application was highly successful in that it demonstrated many problems with the ways that research had been conducted up to that time. At a deeper level, though, it also led many people to question the utility of social psychology and the validity of the very enterprise of social psychological research. The crisis was associated with a fractioning of the sub-discipline into new areas and a trend for new critical perspectives to arise, which suggested that social psychology took insufficient account of social context.”

This lecture utilizes the biographical writings of Kenneth Gergen and an article by Edward E. Sampson to explore the 'crisis' in psychology. Then, this lecture will be focus on the premises and challenges associated with social constructionist paradigm of social psychology.

### How Kenneth Gergen Realized the Limitations of Psychological Experiments

- Kenneth Gergen, a social psychologist and one of the early and chief proponents of social constructionism has talked about his disillusionment with psychological experiments early in his career. In 1965 he published one of his experimental studies in a leading journal of social psychology. In his study, he was able to show through the statistical analysis of his experimental data that positive feedback from another person (an interviewer who asked the respondents, who were college students, to make a series of self-evaluations) results in higher self-esteem than those who are not given any such feedback.
- On introspection as a young scientist, he realized that his satisfaction over publishing his work was based on the belief that each experiment increases our understanding by an improved tapping of social realities. But, he also was critically aware of the non-static nature of social realities as he asserts (Gergen, 1997, p. 116),
- “But what if social life is not itself stable; what if social patterns are in a state of continuous and possibly chaotic transformation? To the extent this is so, then the science does not accumulate knowledge; its knowledge represents no more than a small, and perhaps not very important history of college student behavior in artificial laboratory setting.”

### How Kenneth Gergen Realized the Limitations of Psychological Experiments (Continued...)

- These doubts led him to repeat the same above experiment with one change: he told the respondents that the interviewer was practicing some interview techniques. Clearly, the respondents came to know that the interviewer's feedback was not authentic. This led to an expected result that the 'inauthentic' feedback led to much lesser increase in self-esteem when compared with the control group.
- Two things became very clear to Gergen with the help of the dual experiments. One, the impact on self-esteem was not dependent on what the interviewer did but what the respondents interpreted it as. Two, in both the experiments, the interviewers' feedback was only experimentally arranged and were not truly sincere.

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### How Kenneth Gergen Realized the Limitations of Psychological Experiments (Continued...)

- He concluded that rather than providing true and universal knowledge about human life, experiments only reflected the contemporary cultural conditions which shape human interpretations of their own and others' actions. He explains it,

“ . . . if interpretations come and go across cultural history, and there is virtually no limit on the ways events can be interpreted, then what to make of these results? There was widespread belief at one time in people's souls, and in demon possession; such interpretations are no longer favored. In the sixteenth century, states of melancholy were detected everywhere; early in the present century, people suffered from “nervous breakdowns.” These interpretation are now little evidenced. My results seemed, then, to be reflections of the present cultural conditions.”

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### **Premises and challenges associated with the social constructionist paradigm of social psychology**

- As we learnt in an earlier lecture, the basic premises of the constructionist social psychology are given below. However, Gergen (1997) also attracts our attention to the associated challenges :
  - 1.** Experiences or behaviour in social situations are not outcomes of mental processes ready to be studied objectively.
  - 2.** Experiences and the ways they are shared through are socially constructed. These depend not only on the ways we have been socialized but also the socio-historical context in which the person is living. Gergen (1997) refers to this as an empirical challenge. The challenge before the social psychologists is not to follow the method-centric approach of considering human realities as convertible to variables alone. As per Gergen, the challenge is to also consider human social realities to be shaped in the dynamic socio-historical contexts.

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### Premises and challenges... (continued...)

3. Primary function of talk is not to represent a talk-independent reality but to initiate or regulation some social action. Therefore, for example, when a person shares his or her ideas about happiness or suffering, he or she is also acting out social roles and the shared ideas may be different depending upon the social roles into which the person is placed. Gergen (1997) refers to this as the reflexive challenge. The reasoning is that any social discourse that shapes the worldview of the members of a group or culture serves some purpose to the stakeholders. Therefore, meanings of social realities are liable to change depending upon who is/are generating these and for what purpose. Social psychologists need to be reflexive about this.
4. If the above is true, then in exploring a person's experiences in constructionist version of social psychology, the act of sharing must serve the purpose of 'finding a voice' for the sharer. This is the foundation of trust on which the sharing in research interaction is based. Gergen (1997) refers to this as creative challenge. The act of research also involves meaning-making process and it must serve some purpose to the participant of research with whom the meaning-making process is carried out. Thus, such a research has the creative potential of transforming the realities of human beings by providing a space for their voice.

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