

Constructivism in Psychotherapy
50 minutes conversation with Robert Neimeyer
on constructivist Psychotherapies distinctive features and evolution

A.H.: Robert, thank you so much for willing to have this conversation. You say about post-modern constructivist therapies – and I’m quoting you – that in general they tend to be more collaborative than authoritarian, more developmental than symptom oriented, more process oriented than content focused and more reflective than psychoeducational. You have just published recently a book on the distinctive theoretical and practical features of constructivist therapies ... so, could you tell us shortly about some of these distinctive features, if you want to pick some among others...

R.N.: Well, the book that you mention Aníbal is in a series that concerns different Cognitive and Cognitive-Behavioural approaches to therapy. And so, I was especially asked to distinguish Constructivism from these other approaches - approaches like Beck’s or Linehan’s or the Rational-Emotive Behaviour therapy, the work of Meichenbaum and others. And fortunately this was easy to do because at levels that ranges from the epistemological premises of Constructivism on through its specific strategies of engagement with a client and even particular techniques that are preferentially used by constructivists its pretty comprehensibly different. And so at virtually any level at which you would like to hold the lens of inspection over the contrasts between constructivist work and cognitive-behavioural work you would see differences that are substantial. At an epistemological level of course, various constructivist approaches are joined by the assumption that we do not have a kind of access to reality, to the furniture of the universe in a simple sense.

A.H: Do you believe in furniture?

R.N.: The furniture of the universe, including the literal furniture. It supports us and we have a relationship to it. But that relationship is very much mediated by our structure, by our functioning - the way in which we construct ways of relating to one another, for example on the way we configure these chairs to support us, to support a certain kind o conversation. The way we construct other technologies in order to meet our purposes. So our interaction with the world is deeply humanized, it is deeply integrated into our structure as individuals and particularly as social systems, as intersubjective pairings as in our conversation here today. So, in all of these ways when constructivists think about intervention we think about intervening in meaning and not merely in intervening in the objective circumstances of people’s lives, although therapy of course that may also embrace change at very practical levels and actual oriented levels in addition to the level of our deepest meanings, feelings, reflections on self and others and so on.

A.H.: Ok, so do you think contemporary psychotherapy somehow has been or is being influenced by constructivist theories, metatheories and practices and if yes to what extend is this recognized nowadays?

R.N.: I think that the impact of constructivism is more subtle. It occurs at nearly a cultural level that I believe that in post-modernity we have largely relinquished the assumption that we have easy access to the truth of human beings. And in this stance then which certainly extends far beyond constructivist therapy - into expressions in the domain of art and even science – we have assumptions that really provide a premise or foundation for all of our cultural life that are deeply constructivised. Constructivist psychotherapy participates in those movements and gives them

specific expression in the context of the helping relationship and also more generally in terms of the pursuit of research programs that tend to be more reflective, more “qualitative”, that treat the so called subject as a data contributor. And so, in psychological science - and most particularly in psychological practice - constructivist theory does shape the way in which we engage the work of psychology.

A.H.: Ok. So, we know for sure that there is a constructivist paradigm but is there or was there any time a constructivist movement among clinical practitioners and researchers? And if yes how well is it breathing today?

R.N.: Yes, in fact there's a very important contribution being made at an organizational and institutional level by a friend of mine who lives in Lisboa (*laughs*)...

A.H.: Oh yes? (*laughs*)...

R.N.: I think you should interview him some day because I think he has a lot to say about this question these questions! And in this respect you would be one of several people who anchor developments in their respective regions and countries – one can find them for example with people like Les Greenberg in Canada, Robert Elliott now in Scotland, Guillem Feixas, Luís Botella, and others, Guerreiro, Manuel Villegas in Barcelona, numerous constructivists in Italy, in Chile, in Argentina, in Mexico. So in one region after another one would find vital centres of constructivist thought and training. But I think it is fair to say that in few of these places has constructivism competed successfully with dominant cognitive-behavioural approaches for a place in the academy – that is in the University structure. There, the pride of place, the priority, the hegemony is usually claimed by cognitive-behavioural approaches.

A.H.: And for empirically supported treatment. So you think that this movement did it reached its strongest moment and influencing in the nineties or is now less strong?

R.N.: Oh, I think its still building. No doubt the next decade will be better than the one before. I say that with some humour but also with the sense that in some ways the shift toward a constructivist ethic – if you will – in psychotherapy has changed its focus somewhat. Whereas during the decades of the nineties and much of the current decade there have been a series of conferences organized around constructivism. Many books, some journals devoted to constructivist thought - such as the journal of constructivist psychology. What we have now is something that is a broader kind of diffusion of constructivist themes into many approaches, into many models. So if you look at the work of people like (?..) and Young within the cognitive paradigm, you have people who are moving closer and closer to a constructivist view with respect to attention to deep meaning, schemas, tacit knowing. When you look at the field of family therapy, in particular brief therapy you see many people such as my late colleague and friend Michael White, David Epston - still living and contributing – and others, helping shape the narrative therapy movement. When you look at brief therapy approaches you see people like Michael Hoyt who are clearly constructivist in their orientation and explicitly so. And of course, Bruce Ecker who you, not long ago also, invited here and I suppose also interviewed. So I think that what we have is not so much an organization of constructivists that are requiring people to sign their identity cards and salute the same flag but more a kind of giving a way of constructivist themes. A subtle influencing of many perspectives – humanistic, psychodynamic, systemic and more – which I think is ultimately the healthier contribution to make to culture.