
Demonstrating Social Constructionism in Psychology Courses: The “Who Am I?” Exercise

Bonnie Moradi
Janice D. Yoder
University of Akron

In this article we describe a class exercise aimed at facilitating students' understanding of social constructionism. Students (n = 88) from 3 psychology classes wrote 10 responses to the question “Who am I?” The instructor collected and shuffled their responses, eliminating descriptors that clearly identified the respondents' gender (e.g., mother, brother). All remaining responses for individuals were read to or by the class. Students were able to accurately guess the gender of respondents. A discussion of the social construction of gender followed the exercise. Students' written reactions and comments indicated that the exercise was a useful tool for demonstrating social constructionism and initiating discussion about the meaning of gender.

K. J. Gergen (1985) noted that the integration of social constructionism into psychology may be a controversial but fruitful endeavor and an exciting challenge for “innovative, adventurous, and resilient” (p. 271) psychologists. Accepting this challenge encourages teachers to expose students to social constructionist perspectives and to acknowledge the growing influence of social constructionism within psychology and other sciences (M. M. Gergen, 1998). Such an inclusive approach to discussing knowledge can promote students' critical thinking about science and epistemology regardless of whether they accept a social constructionist philosophy. When taught only didactically, however, social constructionism can be difficult for some students to grasp. The addition of an experiential exercise, like the one pre-

sented here, may facilitate students' understanding of this perspective.

Social constructionists have advanced the notions that psychological knowledge and the processes by which this knowledge is created are historically and culturally situated (K. J. Gergen, 1985, 1994). Furthermore, such knowledge is negotiated through social interaction so that the content and process of scientific psychology reflect societal norms. For example, K. J. Gergen (1985) suggested that social constructionist thinking poses the question “How can theoretical categories be induced or derived from observation, ... if the process of identifying observational attributes itself relies on one's possessing categories?” (p. 266). Thus, our understanding of the world as well as the process of acquiring that understanding, is not fixed, nor are both rooted in absolute, objectively verifiable truth.

Critics questioned such thinking for its seemingly extreme subjectivity and relativism (see Appleby, Hunt, & Jacob, 1994; Bell, 1996; Giamo, 1997). However, K. J. Gergen (1985) explained that the goal of social constructionism is not to imply that knowledge cannot exist but that the rules for creating knowledge should be acknowledged as historically and culturally situated and therefore subject to change. Following such thinking, scholars have proposed social constructionist approaches to understanding numerous phenomena including issues of diversity (West & Fenstermaker, 1995), violence (Buss & Malamuth, 1996), fathering (Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999), and gender (West & Zimmerman, 1987).

Gender provides a ready mechanism for demonstrating social constructionism because gender touches all students' lives. Furthermore, the distinction between sex as essentially biological and gender as socially constructed is often discussed in psychology courses and textbooks (e.g., Bourne & Russo, 1998; Crawford & Unger, 2000; Yoder, 1999). Generally, sex is defined in terms of biological or physical characteristics associated with being male or female, whereas gender is defined in terms of roles or characteristics culturally assigned to sex.

West and Zimmerman (1987) pointed out the limitations of conceptualizing gender as various roles or traits. They argued that gender is omnipresent and interacts with the context within which it is produced. Thus, these authors conceptualized gender not as a set of static traits or roles, but as a dynamic understanding produced through social interaction (also see Deaux & Major, 1987; Unger, 1989). West and Zimmerman (1987) contended that gender is an outcome of, as well as a rationale for, everyday interactions and social arrangements. In other words, gender is something we "do," or socially construct, rather than something we essentially "are" (see Hare-Mustin & Marecek, 1988). Treating gender simply as a set of traits or characteristics (e.g., masculinity, femininity) ignores the social processes by which those characteristics and gender categories were created. Thus people readily regard gendered characteristics as essential features of themselves and others, making these traits appear immutable. It is this essentialist view of gender that often underlies many students' one-sided conceptualization of it. Although this demonstration cannot directly test the veracity of either the essentialist or constructionist perspectives, its purpose is to help students consider and better understand the frequently overlooked constructionist possibility.

In light of West and Zimmerman's (1987) conceptualizations and K. J. Gergen's (1985) call for the integration of social constructionism into psychology, we developed and evaluated an experiential tool for facilitating an understanding of the social construction of gender (i.e., doing gender) and, more broadly, an understanding of social constructionism. Our experience in teaching social constructionism is that students struggle with social constructionist concepts and with thinking outside essentialist models. The exercise presented here can be used to bring a social constructionist approach for understanding gender to life for students and spark discussion of social constructionism and essentialism as different approaches to thinking about diversity (West & Fenstermaker, 1995), a philosophy of science (K. J. Gergen, 1985, 1994), and a critique of positivism (see Kuhn, 1970). Thus, this exercise may prove useful in psychology of women, multiculturalism, research methods, and introductory psychology courses.

Students from two sections of a psychology of women course ($n_s = 11$, with 4 men, and 21, with 5 men) and one section of an experimental psychology course ($n = 56$, with 16 men) participated in our test of the effectiveness of this class exercise. Students wrote 10 responses to the question "Who am I?" (Gordon, 1968). To maintain anonymity, we asked students not to provide their names but only to identify their gender. One woman responded to the question with the following descriptions: "leader, kind-hearted, realistic, a Christian, determined, tenacious, hard-working, optimistic, a good listener, loved." Another woman listed "mother, stu-

dent, nice, independent, caring, talkative, sensitive, intelligent, tall, friendly" as self-descriptors. One man described himself as "human, focused, caring, driven, concerned, narrow-minded, successful, proud, tired, alive." A second man responded to the question with "intelligent, determined, stubborn, emotionally strong, aggressive, sociable, stable, athletic, persistent, a leader (controlling?)."

Within each class, we collected students' lists of responses and randomly selected an equal number of responses from women and men. In each of the two smaller classes, the instructor started by reading one individual's responses to the class, eliminating any clear identifiers of the respondent's gender (e.g., mother, brother). The instructor then asked students to vote on the gender of the respondent. We followed this procedure for each respondent until students acknowledged that their guesses were surprisingly accurate. In the largest class, students formed smaller groups of 8 to 10 members and selected a reader. The instructor gave a shuffled set of the class's responses to the reader (again with a balance of women and men respondents). Readers read the descriptors, members of the group voted on the gender of each respondent, and each group tallied its successful guesses. Groups then reported their success rate to the class as a whole.

In general, students accurately identified the gender of most respondents; pooling data across the three classes, the 77% hit rate (i.e., accuracy of identifying selected respondents' gender) was significantly better than the chance rate of 50%, $\chi^2(1, N = 88) = 6.15, p < .05$. Follow-up discussion focused on the notion that, from a social constructionist perspective, our ability to make correct judgments reflects a need to "gender" our self descriptions. Such gendering is even stronger in people's everyday presentations: in their names, their voices, their clothes, their hair, and so on. Fiske and Stevens (1993) argued that gender-indeterminate people (e.g., Pat from the television show *Saturday Night Live*) are even more disturbing than age-inappropriate people. When class discussion clarifies how "doing gender" exemplifies social constructionism, discussion can broaden to social constructionist approaches regarding issues of diversity (i.e., doing difference; West & Fenstermaker, 1995), to philosophy of science (i.e., doing psychology; K. J. Gergen, 1985, 1994), and to other approaches considering sex and gender (e.g., essentialism).

To evaluate the effectiveness of the "Who am I?" exercise, students completed a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*) in response to this question: "Social constructionists talk about 'doing gender.' Did this exercise help explain this process to you?" Students then recorded any additional comments or reactions they had to this exercise. Across the three classes, 84% of the students reported that the exercise furthered their understanding (giving ratings of 4 or 5). Future evaluations of the effectiveness of this exercise might explore more direct assessments of students' learning, such as improvement on examination items covering these concepts.

In addition, almost all of the open-ended comments indicated that the students perceived this exercise as useful in solidifying their understanding of social constructionism. For example, one student taking the experimental psychology course stated, "Simply talking about 'doing gender' or 'doing psychology' doesn't relay the full message. When I first heard about 'doing ____,' I didn't understand. After doing the exercise ... , I better understood the concept." Another student

from the experimental psychology course wrote, "It helped me see how gender is created as a reality." A student in a psychology of women course stated, "It helped clarify the differences between social constructionism and positivism for me. I think this illustration should be used in the future when teaching this subject." A student in a section of psychology of women stated "It gave me a clear understanding that unconsciously we are 'doing gender.'" The only student whose comment suggested that the exercise was not helpful pointed out that as a result of the disproportionate number of women and men students in that class, "It wasn't real difficult to guess who was who. It is, however, a good idea for a male balanced sample." (The student was unaware that we used a balanced subsample.)

We encourage instructors interested in using the "Who am I?" exercise to consider several issues. First, we agree with the last student that the exercise may be more effective in classes with a balance of women and men. Among the three classes discussed in this article, students in the more gender-balanced classes identified respondents' gender more accurately than those in the class that included a limited number of men, despite the use of balanced subsamples. Second, our review of students' responses suggested that those that included traits (e.g., caring, strong) rather than roles (e.g., student, a Christian) were more illustrative of the concept of doing gender. Thus, instructors using this exercise may focus the "Who am I?" question by asking students to list qualities, rather than roles, that describe themselves.

Finally, instructors can encourage students to engage in critical and expansive thinking by discussing social constructionist, as well as essentialist, explanations for the results of the class exercise. For example, one such alternative explanation may be that gender differences that emerged in descriptors reflect actual differences between women and men and that the accuracy of students' judgments reflected their knowledge of such differences. Instructors can use the process by which the class accepts or rejects various explanations to illustrate further the social construction of knowledge.

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Notes

1. A version of this article was presented at the meeting of the Association for Women in Psychology, Salt Lake City, UT, 2000.
2. Send correspondence to Janice Yoder, Department of Psychology, University of Akron, Akron, OH 44325–4301; e-mail: jyoder@uakron.edu.

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