

What's so Radical about Radical Constructivism?

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Introduction: Who is Ernst von Glasersfeld?

Picture: Book cover, *Partial Memories Sketches from an Improbable Life*

Reading: Quote from the Preface from this book:

“Memories are a personal affair. They are what comes to mind when you think back, not what might in fact have happened at that earlier time in your life. You can no longer be certain of what seemed important then, because you are now looking at the past with today's eyes. The Italian philosopher Giambattista Vico had that insight three hundred years ago: When we think of things that lie in the past, we see them in terms of the concepts we have now.

Neurophysiologists and science in general have no idea of how we manage to remember. Memory is still a miracle, no less than our capability of becoming aware of experiences.

I have at times returned to places where I had been fifty years earlier. I can say that my memories always contained a core that was compatible with the later experience; but they also had features that now seemed distorted or downright wrong. The discrepancies concerned not only visual impressions, landscapes, cities, houses, and the appearance of people, but also events, conversations, feelings, and the relationships with others.

I therefore have to stress that these sketches are sketches. They are not an autobiography and they make no claim to be objectively ‘true’. I recount what I manage to reconstruct and know full well that this may not be the way I experienced it at the time. I call my reminiscences ‘partial’, because on the one hand they are incomplete and on the other biased by my likes and dislikes.”

Sketch I Who is Judith Lombardi?

In keeping with what I just read I tell you now some stories about me, about some of my encounters with Ernst von Glasersfeld and Radical Constructivism.

I am a social worker by training. I am an independent scholar, since I no longer teach at university yet still desire to learn and teach. Teaching is learning. I am a video-ethnographer and have been for about 20 years. I like documenting people saying what they said and seeing it again and again so that my interpretations might be clearer to me -- and my audience. Lastly, I long for the day when I feel comfortable calling myself an artist. Why? Because I think art is a primary means for generating social change in our current society.

How did I come to know EvG?

I first met Ernst von Glasersfeld in 1995 at an American Society for Cybernetics meeting in Chicago IL. He was there with his wife Charlotte and several other well-established cybernetic thinking elders including Heinz von Foerster, Herbert Brun, Humberto Maturana, Stafford Beer and Gordon Pask. We talked briefly and I enjoyed my conversations with Charlotte immensely. BUT it was not until 2002 that I came to know Ernst von Glasersfeld (EvG).

In 2002 I was asked to video Ernst for a keynote address to be shown at an international conference in Vienna Austria. This keynote address and conference were about his dear friend and colleague Heinz von Foerster (HvF). Ernst being Ernst, had decided he could not travel to Austria due to his wife's illness. He would not leave her. So I was "commissioned" by the American Society for Cybernetics to go to the von Glasersfeld home in Massachusetts and video Ernst about Heinz and his "three imperatives." (HvF imperatives in part I of EvG trilogy)

It was during this interview that I came to know EvG, his ideas and his theory about knowing Radical Constructivism (RC). As luck would have it, this was the beginning of our work together on a DVD trilogy I hope to complete in 2012.

I now want to share with you an excerpt of that first interview, part I of the EvG trilogy, in which Ernst talks about Heinz's monumental contributions to our thinking about knowledge and about science.

DVD Segment 1: Introduction (10 minutes)

Comments on Segment 1

1. **Undifferentiated coding**... signals generated by sense organs only vary in intensity, as such, our senses only tell us how much, never what. Hence it is we who generate the qualities out of which our experiential world is built up.
2. **From this insight** comes the idea so eloquently stated by HvF as the "delusion that observations can be made without an observer." And the moment one *realizes* what this means -- any form of realism, objectivity, is out of bounds.
3. The most **profound resistance against radical constructivism** is that if it is I who constructs an experiential world than it is I who is responsible for what I do and what I think. This does not mean one can act any way one wishes, there are constraints from which we can make choices. (Cybernetics of Cybernetics, 1979)

I think these three “fundamentals” were extremely important to the creation and development of EvG’s Radical Constructivism (RC) is nested in cybernetics.

Sketch II Ernst von Glasersfeld, Cybernetics and Radical Constructivism.

Cybernetics “Ways of thinking about thinking of which it is one.” (Larry Richards)

When interviewing Ernst in 2010, I asked him: why did you title your last book *Partial Memories Sketches from an Improbable Life*?

“Because my life happened altogether by accidents, and by what I consider in retrospect a cybernetic attitude, so I was open to any possibility.” (EvG, 2010)

Cybernetics “The art of maintaining equilibrium in a world of constraints *and* possibilities.” (EvG)

In the following segment, Ernst distinguishes first-order from second-order cybernetics, offers his definition of cybernetics and talks about luck.

DVD Segment 2 Cybernetics is not interested in causality but constraints. (12 minutes)

Comments Segment 2

1. Second-order cybernetics is useful for those interested in cognition.
2. Models are not good or bad, right or wrong. They are more or less useful.
3. Generating Triadic Relations can be a useful tool for escaping a causality trap.

Sketch III Triadic Relations

Once, when visiting Heinz Von Foerster on Rattlesnake Hill in California, he gave me an article he had written entitled “The Cybernetics of Cybernetics.” In this article he writes about many things including triadic relations stating:

“A Triadic relationship can be compared, perhaps with the inter-relationship between the chicken and the egg and the rooster. You cannot say who was first and you cannot say who was last AND you need all three in order to have all three.” (Cybernetics of Cybernetics, p1.)

In video segment 2 about Cybernetics, Ernst points to a triadic relationship between evolution, equilibrium and viability. In segment 3, Ernst speaks about Piaget’s theory of cognition and a triadic relationship between the concepts adaptation, assimilation and accommodation. Ernst then speaks about another triadic relationship as a consequence of our evolution between a stimulus situation, an action, and the consequences of that action (Feedback).

DVD [Segment 3](#) Radical Constructivism, Piaget and Feedback (8.5 minutes)

Comments on Segment 3

Piaget theories about cognition and epistemology, how we come to know what we know was vital to Ernst's development of "Radical Constructivism."

Sketch IV How did the term RC come into being?

When reviewing the literature and video footage of EvG, as far as I can discern, Ernst first used the term "Radical Constructivism" when discussing Piaget's theory about genetic epistemology. As the story goes Ernst was conversing about how many people fail to notice that Piaget's concepts about epistemology *evolved* over time.

"So when I was teaching genetic epistemology I made it a point to distinguish my understandings and approach toward Piaget's constructivism from *other* constructivists." – (EvG Ecology of Mind website, Q/A EvG)

It was in this context that the term "*Radical* Constructivism" emerged. Radical meaning at the root, hence Radical Constructivism means that at the root of one's knowing is a self-determined observer, distinguishing and organizing his or her experiential world.

In this context knowledge is NOT a commodity or conventional epistemology which treats Knowledge as the embodiment of TRUTH in an independent world.

Three Basic Principles of Radical Constructivism:

- Knowledge is actively built, not passively received, by a cognizing agent.
- The function of knowledge is adaptive in a biological sense of the term.
- Cognition is a subject's *orientation* of an experiential world. (EvG 1988)¹

So, how might Radial Constructivism be relevant to disciplines such as psychology?

DVD [Segment 4](#) RC: Management, Therapy and Daily Life (3 minutes)

Sketch V Final Comments

When cybernetics is enacted in conversations a primary function of conversation (nested in autonomy) is NOT communication (nested in control) BUT the maintenance and creation of distinctions. So that conversation becomes the converse of control. (Larry Richards, in conversation)

¹ There are three basic assumptions of RC according to Ernst von Glasersfeld: memory, primitive values and consciousness. I leave those for another discussion and hopefully conversation.

DVD [Segment 5](#) Final Thoughts – for now, if time permits. (4 minutes)

In not wanting to be right, yet wanting to learn something, I now want to have a discussion about what I has experience in a conversation.

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References (just a few)

Music Composed by Herbert Brun. ()

Paper “Cybernetics of Cybernetics” HvF. (1979)

Paper “Why People Dislike Radical Constructivism.” EvG. (2010)

Paper Presentation EvG at ASC Meeting in CA. Rodney Donaldson. (1988)

Website “Ecology of Mind Website, Question and Answer EvG.” Vincent Kenny ()

Paper “An Anticommunication Imperative, Tribute to Herbert Brun. L. Richards. (2009)

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