

**Social Constructionist
Perspectives on
Group Work**

Edited by
Emerson F. Rasera

Taos Institute Publications
Chagrin Falls, Ohio
USA

Social Constructionist Perspectives on Group Work

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INTRODUCTION

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION AND GROUP WORK

Emerson F. Rasera

WHY THINK ABOUT THE CONNECTIONS between social constructionism and group work? Social constructionism has been used in different fields of professional practice, whether in psychotherapy, in organizations, or in education, by means of different approaches, concepts and methodologies (Gergen, 2009; Hosking & McNamee, 2006; McNamee & Gergen, 1992). Its use has allowed the reinterpretation of traditional concepts, the development of specific techniques, and even the creation of broad approaches to understanding and transforming social realities. However, in group work research and practice, its use has been more discreet. The essentialist traditions strongly presented in this field have hampered the spread of postmodern and social constructionist ideas.

Groups are fertile ground for constructionist ideas because they are privileged spaces for dialogue in which the co-construction of the world through language plays a central role. Although we identify some constructionist approaches that explicitly value group work (Browne & Jain, 2002; Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005; Herzig & Chasin, 2006), we consider that there are still large opportunities for new developments and the need to reflect on the characteristics and the challenges of this way of working.

The aim of this book is to present different forms of group work influenced by a social constructionist sensibility. The book shows how these two fields of knowledge can be connected and indicates the need for new theoretical developments. Despite offering theoretical contributions, the emphasis of the book is on the translation of some constructionist concepts to daily practice, featuring excerpts from group conversations, participants' reports, and the description of ways of working that can inspire other professionals interested in using the constructionist vocabulary in their group work.

We hope this book brings to those involved with social construction, conversations about the importance of group work connecting the voices present here with other voices, enabling a dialogue that transforms our practices and ourselves.

What Social Constructionism is That?

Social constructionism may have different emphases according to different authors. Reading the book chapters helps to identify some shared characteristics in the way the authors have privileged specific concepts and ways of working in different contexts. All of these features show a trend in how to introduce social constructionism. Among these characteristics we might highlight the following:

Relational and dialogical emphasis. The chapters highlight the co-construction of meaning and bringing a vision of language-in-action. There is an ongoing concern about recognizing and identifying the dialogism in the meaning-making processes in those chapters that describe professional practices as well as those that discuss research results. References to the work of Kenneth Gergen, Sheila McNamee, and Mary Jane Spink are found in various chapters of the book. Moreover, this emphasis is combined with a dialogical view of language-in-action on the descriptions of group work, in which the authors seek to describe practical ways of promoting dialogue in different contexts.

The influence of constructionist ideas from the clinical settings. Although the papers encompass experiences beyond the clinical setting, including organizational development, community health, and professional training, vocabulary originated in constructionist approaches to family therapy is widely used. Whereas most of the authors of the chapters belong to the community of family therapists, it is easy to understand the presence of concepts, attitudes, and quotes from that field. References to the collaborative approach of Harlene Anderson, the reflecting processes of Tom Andersen, and narrative therapy of White and Epston, are very common. Interestingly, the use of these concepts shows their flexibility and potential and also the creative ability of authors to adapt their use in different contexts. Thus, instead of an approach that criticizes the limits of these concepts and ways of acting, the authors of the chapters invite an expansion of their use.

Sensibility to the context. The influence of the constructionist discourse in the clinical settings is combined with a strong sensibility to the context, which allows the authors a careful use of those contributions. Several chapters seek to highlight how the group work responded to the characteristics and needs of the context in which they operate, that is, the immediate institutional context, social stigmatizing discourses, public policy, or even the broader social and historical context. In this sense, there is either a concern with the micro-social context, its interactional rules and forms of relationship, or with the macro-context, its policies and traditions.

Ethical-political Concern. Although all knowledge sustains, at least implicitly, a set of values and has implications for how we build the world, several chapters present an

explicitly ethical-political concern. They seek the construction of democratic relations in healthcare, the transformation of social discourses, the promotion of inclusive group work, and the recognition of the ethical-political effects of research practices and training processes. They assume, in this way, the impossibility of neutrality in knowledge production and a commitment to a set of values in the construction of reality.

Beyond a theoretical identity. The multiplicity of constructionist perspectives enables authors to have different forms of identification with social constructionism. Thus, it is possible to identify a continuum where, on one hand, there is clearly an affirmation of a constructionist affiliation, without questioning or reservation, and on the other hand, there is a silence regarding this identification. In the middle of this continuum, there is the identification with constructionism as part of a set of theoretical influences, or its combination with other theoretical perspectives, or a desire not to live it as a dogma. This game of closeness and distance portrays different paths and professional projects of the various authors in this collection. Moreover, it shows the way group work connects to social constructionism: reproducing concepts and ideas or expanding and changing them and, thus, bringing new issues to social constructionism.

What Group Work is That?

As it is possible to identify a way to present social constructionism in the chapters of the book, we also recognize a preferred way for authors to address the group, which can be characterized by a non-essentialist view and a practical approach, focused on specific forms to organize and facilitate the conversation. In the book, group work can be understood in different ways.

Group as conversation. The group is described by the authors from a pragmatic perspective and there are no efforts to build a conceptual definition valid for all contexts. On one hand, we can understand this from the kind of text favored by the authors as characterized mostly by experience reports and case studies; on the other hand, it is associated with the view of the group as a meaning-making system. Thus, the focus moves from an ontological description of the group as if it were an entity, and turns to the conversational conditions promoted by the group work. In this sense, the concern with “the group” becomes a concern with “the conversation.” In the book, this pragmatic approach is also associated with (a) little attention to the justifications on the choice of using group work, as opposed to other forms of work, and (b) the near absence of a dialogue with other theoretical approaches to group work.

The productive function of the group. Based on a conversational metaphor, group work is presented in the book considering its different uses and how it functions to construct relational realities. It consists of a way of caring for people, teams, and communities, as well as doing training and research. In the chapters of the book, you can identify how group work creates conditions for the care of children and their caregivers, people who went through divorce, those involved in situations of violence, or living with different kinds of suffering in the community; builds collaborative forms of relationship among teams and between professionals and the community; promotes the organization of patients, families, and community; encourages autonomy and collaboration among professionals in training; and explores dialogism in the context of research.

The group organization. Considering the emphasis on the pragmatic description of group work, the authors seek to detail the ways of organizing and facilitating the group. In most of the chapters, the group assumes the characteristic of small group. The group can be open or closed, involving a single session or a series of meetings. There is a careful organization of space and of the conversation that allows everybody to listen and to express themselves in a respectful and attentive way, and to collaborate in building the group and achieving their goals. Technically, the group presents a more conversational emphasis, and sometimes it includes expressive and performing techniques. The role of the facilitator is strongly influenced by the different therapeutic proposals in the constructionist literature and is marked by a stance of openness, curiosity, and reflexivity. Beyond the authors' commitment to any of these proposals, there is a creative combination of different concepts and practices from family therapy to group work.

Although the authors present the details of the way they work with groups, there is no proposition of any particular model for group work. This way of thinking about the group organization combined with the pragmatic perspective of the group as a conversation and the emphasis on the productive aspects of the group, makes it difficult to propose a "constructionist approach to group work" which is neither sought nor desired. What is produced in the book is a collection of fragmented and multiple possibilities of doing group work using a constructionist vocabulary.

This set of qualities that characterizes the connections between social constructionism and group work as it is proposed in this book finds a particular expression in each of its chapters. Thus, seeking to offer a panoramic view of the book, we present the chapters of this collection.

The Book: Contributions and Contributors

The book is divided into three sections: *Group Work in Different Contexts*, *Institutional and Community Work*, and *Training and Research*. In the first section, the chapters cover group work with various populations such as health professionals, patients, children and adolescents with learning disabilities, and people who went through divorce in their families. These chapters allow us to think about the group functioning and its effects in different contexts such as healthcare, psychotherapy, and education. In the second section, the chapters tell stories about the experiences of people living with HIV/AIDS, transvestites, people who suffer the stigma of schizophrenia, professionals in a hospital, an NGO dedicated to working with relational conflicts, and an approach to community therapy. The reading of these chapters, besides showing how to make changes in people's lives based on a social sensibility, points out the challenges of using constructionist ideas in institutional contexts and the associated political issues. In the last section, we have two studies that investigate relational ways of thinking about training, and two chapters that propose group work as a research strategy and a resource for social change, questioning the distinction between intervention and research. At the end of each section, there is a comment from a guest author and the responses of the authors of the chapters, which enhances the contributions of the texts, in a partial but integrated way.

Exploring a bit of each chapter, we have the contribution of Celiane Camargo-Borges, *Collaborative Group Practices: Exercising Dialogue in a Healthcare Setting*, opening the *Group work in different contexts* section. In this paper, the author identifies the need for healthcare professionals to combine technical skills with a sensibility to relational and collaborative ways of engaging in professional-patient relationships. Thus, she aims to explore the practical ways in which patients and professionals can act to create an opportunity for dialogue. Through a case study with a group for hypertensive patients, the author analyzes the co-creation of meanings of connection, participation, and belonging. In this chapter, Camargo-Borges shows how the dialogue allows for greater engagement and co-responsibility, transforming relationships and promoting democratic values in healthcare.

Rosana Rapizo presents a way of working with people who went through divorce in the chapter *Group Work with People from Divorced Families: Opening Space for Dialogue and Conversation*. After analyzing the challenges faced by those involved in the process of divorce, the author describes the history of her experience and the way of working with this population based on constructionist ideas. Husbands, wives, and children, separate or together, attend the groups. Group facilitation is based on conversa-

tional and reflexive perspectives, and graphic materials, sculpture, and role-playing may be used. Through the testimonies of the participants, the author shows how this model of care enables new opportunities for dialogue and allows us to question the current discourse on divorce.

In Chapter 3, *From Working **with** Groups to Working **as** a Group: Reflections of Group Practice in the Family Health Strategy*, Carla Guanaes-Lorenzi discusses the challenges and opportunities of group work in healthcare based on an investigation conducted with a community health team. She analyzes group work in its double dimension: as a resource for the care of a community and for the interdisciplinary team itself. Emphasizing the team's resources and promoting relational responsibility, she points to the team learning of the group as a resource for a dialogical healthcare.

In *Learning to Learn: The Story of a Group of Children and Adolescents*, Selma de Freitas Leitão Torres presents her work with children with learning disabilities and their educators. She describes the work inspired by social constructionism, the use of a reflecting team, the children/adolescents and educators' participation, the group work, and the activities in the shelter where they live. Through the narratives of the therapeutic process, she shows how children/adolescents have actively participated in the construction of their own change, how they have learned to take care of each other, and how educators have changed the way they perceive the children. Concluding the paper, she presents the changes of the team, the collaborative way of working and recognizes the legitimacy of the shelter as a place of care and development.

In Chapter 5, Azair Vicente and colleagues describe a way of organizing the initial conversations of a group that facilitates its integration and development. They describe the constructionist assumptions that organize this practice, as well as the conversational resources and the role of the facilitators. The authors analyze in detail two episodes of a group and show how it was possible to transform the meanings of understanding/misunderstanding in the group that influenced the process of group composition. Based on this way of working, they co-created the preferred ways to talk in the group and they defined it as "a privileged space for the exercise of inclusion and negotiation of differences" (p. 70).

In the first chapter of the second part of the book, Chapter 6, I present my journey doing group research and practice influenced by social constructionism. Initially, I present a redescription of group using a constructionist vocabulary. Given this theoretical redescription, I analyze its usefulness in three different contexts: in the clinical setting, with groups of people with HIV; in the institutional context, facilitating the organization of an AIDS NGO; in the community, with a group of transvestite sex workers. Therefore, I show how constructionist conversational tools have great flexibility and utility for those

who work with groups and how they provide a way of expanding the conversation, the negotiation of meanings and the inclusion of difference. At the same time, I invite a reflection on the limits of this vocabulary and the importance of evaluating the ways of doing group work, with rationale, emphasizing the social and political implications.

In Chapter 7, *Collaborative Processes Can Create Social Change in Schizophrenia*, Cecilia Villares Cruz and Fernanda de Almeida Pimentel describe their efforts to transform the discourse on schizophrenia by building networks of solidarity and empowering people with schizophrenia and their families. The authors present the creation of the project, SOSesq, and the Brazilian Association of Schizophrenia, highlighting how group work inspired by a constructionist perspective opened space for connection, for strengthening relationships, and for promoting leadership training. Thus, from a position of not knowing, of curiosity, and of co-responsibility, the authors show the importance of considering people with schizophrenia and their families as experts who are able to decide about their lives and to participate in collective action.

Marisa Japur and Cristina Ruffino reflect about the transformation of organizational processes in the chapter *Conversations to Promote Conversations*. They present the report of a consultancy to a hospital in which they describe how they used conversations planned and developed based on constructionist ideas, especially from appreciative and collaborative approaches. The authors describe the various steps of the consulting process and how it was possible to transform the institutional demand based on the “expert intervention” towards the collective construction of the change. They reflect critically about how they combined care with the conversational process with an attention to the content of the conversation.

In the next chapter, *The Challenge of Aligning the Ideas and the Practice in an Institution with a Social Constructionist Inspiration*, Carlos Eduardo Zuma and Jorge Bergallo tell how a social constructionist perspective orients the social services and the management of the Instituto Noos. After presenting the historical context of the foundation of the Institute, they describe the theoretical influences that contributed to the practices proposed by the Institute. Among their practices are family therapy, community therapy, and reflexive groups applied to gender and violence themes. Guided by a commitment to social change, the Institute is also involved in campaigns for changes in behavior and in the legislation. Through these actions, the Institute seeks to create collaborative environments that “aim the promotion of dialogue, collaboration, negotiation, the building of agreements or the possibility of coexistence of different or even contrary ideas” (p. 120).

In Chapter 10, Marilene Grandesso introduces the integrative community therapy

through a constructionist lens. She defines community as a system of relations organized in language and community therapy as a critical postmodern practice, guided by the principles of social construction. She describes in detail the practice of community therapy, from its steps (warming up, choosing a subject, contextualizing, problematizing, and closing), going through its rules and the stance of the facilitator. It is possible to clearly identify the contributions of Anderson's Collaborative Approach and White's Narrative Therapy in the organization and in the understanding of community therapy. The author shows how integrative community therapy is a resource for those interested in promoting the connection among people and the strengthening of individuals, communities, and networks.

The third section of the book, dedicated to the topics of training and research, begins with a chapter written by Marilia Pereira, Roseli Righetti, and Vera Denize Irani, on the training proposal for social programs staff developed by the Institute Familia. Considering the constructionist view of language, group and learning process, they explain how they select students, prepare each class of the course, develop supervision, propose self-managed groups for the students, teach in pairs of faculty, participate in self-managed group for teachers, and evaluate the students. They conclude the chapter highlighting how they position themselves in an active and peripheral way, allowing students to build a collaborative network of learning.

In Chapter 12, *Mixing Voices: Interchanges and Reflections on the Challenges of Training Therapists*, Eloisa Vidal Rosas and Leonora Corsini discuss the process of training family therapists. Initially, they introduce how they approached constructionist ideas and present some thoughts on the challenges of the training process from a constructionist perspective. Continuing, they report the results of an evaluation of the Instituto Noos's Family Therapy Program by their students. The authors identify the importance students attribute to the tuning between theory and practice and the view of communication and language promoted by the course, besides a growing appreciation of reflecting about responsibility and ethics. Throughout the text, the authors present several reflections on the Brazilian social and cultural context and they suggest thinking about constructionism as a theory, practice, and personal experience.

Contributing to the debate on social constructionism and research, Mary Jane Spink, Vera Mincoff Menegon, and Benedito Medrado discuss the use of workshops as research strategies in *Floating Meanings: Dialogical Uses of Workshops in Research Settings*. The authors conceive the group in its theoretical-methodological and ethical-political dimensions (i.e., as a way to record information and to promote reflection on specific topics). They show how they conduct workshops, describing their structure, activities, forms of

information registration and analysis. The authors emphasize how the workshops allow the collective construction of knowledge, combining “data collection” and “information production,” and possibly having different uses for researchers and participants.

Closing the book, there is Murilo Moscheta, Laura Vilela Souza, and Clarissa Corradi-Webster’s chapter, *Social Constructionist Resources for Investigating and Working with Groups in Healthcare*. The authors analyze the implications of social constructionist discourse for the coordination of groups, either as a resource for research, or an intervention in health settings. They select three ways of thinking about these implications, highlighting dimensions of group work: the group as a creative practice, as an appreciative practice, and as an inclusive practice. The authors show how these ways of thinking about group work recognize the multipartiality, transience, and ethical effects of the knowledge produced in the group. At the same time, they show how it can transform the patients’ care and the relationships among the health team.

The three sections of the book are finished, respectively, with comments by Sheila McNamee, Saul Fuks, and Kenneth Gergen, internationally recognized authors for their contributions to the themes of this book. Selecting specific points for discussion, the commentators allowed the authors to deepen the reflection, albeit briefly, of the fundamental aspects shared by the chapters. Through this dialogue, it was possible to connect the particular contributions of each chapter to current issues in the constructionist discourse and group work.

Finally, it is possible to identify the diverse contributions of the book, especially for the field of mental health, community work, and healthcare. It is also important to recognize the lack of contributions in the book on important fields like organizations and schools. Thus, there are many opportunities for expanding the proposals and reflections made by the authors and for engaging in dialogue with those involved in these other fields.

We hope the book will be useful to those professionals who share constructionist ideas (but perhaps do not do group work) as a source of inspiration and expansion of the repertoire of possibilities for action. Likewise, we believe that the book may be useful to group therapists and those involved in group work, offering alternatives for understanding, organizing, and facilitating groups.

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