Social Construction

Entering The Dialogue

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Chapter 1

The Drama of
Social Construction

A dramatic transformation is taking place in the world of ideas. Everywhere traditions are thrown into question. There is growing doubt in universal and authoritative standards of truth, objectivity, rationality, progress, and morality. Faith is everywhere tested; insecurity raps incessantly at the door. Yet, from this tumultuous condition new dialogues are emerging; new voices of hope and promise for human existence are raised. These conversations now move across continents and cultures and are accompanied by a profusion of new professional practices — in organizations, education, therapy, social research, social work, counseling, conflict resolution, community development and more.

There are many names for this revolution in thought and practice. Terms such as post-foundationalism, post-empiricism, post-Enlightenment and postmodernism are often among them. However, woven through all these discussions is the notion of social construction — that is, the creation of meaning through our collaborative activities. While social construction is neither authored by any single individual or group, nor singular and unified, there is substantial sharing across communities. Tensions and insecurities are not feared because to establish a final truth, a foundational logic, a code of values or one slate of practices would be contrary to the very unfolding of ideas championed by social constructionists.

We authors have spent most of our professional careers engaged in constructionist dialogues. Our purpose in this book is to present an account that will enable students, colleagues and practitioners — as well as those who are simply curious — to gain a basic understanding and appreciation of the drama and power of these ideas. In the first two chapters we will outline some of the most important theoretical developments. We will then turn to the impact of such ideas on the ways we live and work. We shall be concerned with constructionist ideas in action — in organizations, psychotherapy, education, conflict resolution, social research, and everyday life. Finally we shall take up common critiques of constructionism. [1]

The Basic Idea: We Construct the World

Social constructionism is based on one major idea, simple and straightforward. However, as we unpack the implications and consequences, this simplicity will rapidly dissolve. The basic idea asks us to rethink virtually everything we have been taught about the world and ourselves. And with this rethinking we are invited into new and exciting forms of action.

To appreciate the possibilities, consider the world of common sense knowledge. What is more obvious than the fact that the world is simply out there for us to observe and understand? There are

[1] The term "constructivism" is often used interchangeably with "constructionism." Constructivism places the site of the world construction within the mind or interior of the individual. While there are certain commonalities between this movement and social constructionism, we will use the latter terms exclusively in the present work to underscore the central importance placed, not on individuals, but on relationships as the site of world construction.

trees, buildings, automobiles, women, men, dogs and cats, and so on. If we observe carefully enough, we can learn how to save the forests, build strong buildings, and improve the health of children. Now, let's stand these trusted assumptions on their head.

What if we said there are no trees, buildings, women, men and so on until we agree that there are? "Absurd," you may say, "Just look around you; all these were here long before we came along." That sounds reasonable, but let's take little Julie, a one-year-old, out for a walk. Her gaze seems to move past trees, buildings and cars without notice; she does not seem to distinguish men from women. William James once said that the world of a child is a "booming, buzzing confusion." Whether you agree with him or not, Julie's world doesn't seem to be the kind we live in as adults. Unlike Julie, we notice autumn leaves turning from green to gold, that the house on our left is Victorian, the car in the street is a BMW, and that the woman standing in that door is actually a transvestite. What reaches our eyeballs may not be different from Julie's, but what this world means to us is different. We construct the world in a different way. This difference is rooted in our social relationships. From these relationships the world has become what it is.

Different You's from Different Views

Let's take you, the reader as the object of our lesson. Who or what are you? Imagine that you are standing in front of a large group of people, drawn from all walks of life and regions of the world. Each person looks at you and then announces what he/she sees before them. It might go like this:

To the:	You are:
Biologist	"a mammal"
Hairdresser	"last year's style"
Teacher	"promising"
Gay man	"straight"
Fundamentalist Christian	"a sinner"
Parent	"surprisingly successful"
Artist	"an excellent model"
Psychologist	"slightly neurotic"
Physicist	"an atomic composition"
Banker	"a future customer"
Doctor	"a hypochondriac"
Hindu	"imperfect state of Atman"
Lover	"a wonderful person"
Ifalukian	"filled with liget"

If there were no one to identify you, what then would you be? Would you be anything at all?

The foundational idea of social construction seems simple enough, but it is also profound. Everything we consider real is socially constructed. Or, more dramatically, *Nothing* is real unless people agree that it is.

Your skeptical voice might respond, "You mean that death is not real," or "the body," or "the sun," or "this chair" ... and the list goes on. We must be clear on this point. Social constructionists do not say, "There is nothing," or "There is no reality." The important point is that whenever people define what "reality" is, they are always speaking from a cultural tradition. To be sure, something has happened for them, but to describe it will require that it be represented from a particular cultural standpoint — in a particular language, or through some visual or oral media.

To illustrate, if we say, "His father died," we are usually speaking from a biological standpoint. We are constructing the event as the termination of certain bodily functioning. (Yet even medical specialists may disagree on the definition of death; the transplant surgeon may have a different opinion from the family physician.) From other traditions we might also say, "He has gone to heaven," "He will live forever in her heart," "This is the beginning of a new cycle of his reincarnation," "His burden has been eased," "He lives in his legacy of good works," "In his three children, his life goes on," or "The atomic composition of this object has changed." Outside all conventions of understanding, what is there to be said? For little Julie, the event might indeed be unremarkable. For the constructionist, it is not that, "There is nothing," but "nothing for us." In other words, it is from our relationships that the world becomes filled with what we take to be "trees," "the sun," "bodies," "chairs" and so on.

In a broader sense, we may say that as we communicate with each other we construct the world in which we live. If we remain

in our familiar traditions, life may continue as usual. As long as we make the familiar distinctions, for example, between men and women, the rich and the poor or the educated and the uneducated, life remains relatively predictable. Yet, all that we take for granted can also be challenged. For example, "problems" don't exist in the world for all to see; rather we construct worlds of "the good" and deem those events that stand in the way of achieving what we value as "a problem." Could all that we construct as "problems" not be reconstructed as "opportunities?" By the same token, as we speak together, we could also bring new worlds into being. We could construct a world in which there are three genders or a world where the "mentally ill" are "heroes," or where "the power in all organizations lies not within individual leaders but in relationships."

It is at this point that you can begin to appreciate the enormous potential of constructionist ideas. For the constructionist, our actions are not constrained by anything traditionally accepted as true, rational, or right. Standing before us is a vast spectrum of possibility, an endless invitation to innovation. This is not to say that we should, then, abandon all that we take to be real and good. Not at all. But it is to say that we are not bound by the chains of either history or tradition. As we speak together, listen to new voices, raise questions, ponder alternative metaphors, and play at the edges of reason, we cross the threshold into new worlds of meaning. The future is ours — together — to create.

Positive Aging: A Case Study

Typically we view aging as a period of decline. As commonly understood, childhood is a period of development, in adulthood we reach maturity, and in old age we go down hill. But consider this commonplace construction. We live our adult years with a dread of aging; we look relentlessly for ways to "stay young," or at least "to look young." Old is bad. And for many, the view of decline is also self-fulfilling. Because "I am getting old, I must cut down on my activities, exercise and interests." As a result, the body and one's enthusiasm for life decline.

But if aging is a social construction, why should we sustain the negative understanding? Aren't there ways in which we could see aging as a positive process, a period of growth, enrichment and development? Challenged by this possibility, the two of us have created an electronic newsletter called Positive Aging. Here we include diverse materials from scientific research and elsewhere that emphasizes the positive potentials of aging. Readers everywhere seem pleased. As one reader said, "The newsletter keeps up my hopes that I will continue to have a fulfilling life for a long time."

Most enlightening for us have been workshops we have conducted with people interested in positive aging. Here we challenge groups to develop positive reconstructions for such dreaded events as "physical decline," "chronic illness," "loss of physical attractiveness" and "loss of loved ones." In general, such groups are wonderfully creative. They show us, for example, that chronic illness is also an opportunity for appreciating the significance of loved ones, for learning patience and tolerance, for dropping pretenses, for having time to learn and explore and for creating new avenues of activity (for example, making a family web-site, starting support groups, learning a new skill or writing poetry.) These groups teach us that together we may produce new realities of aging.

From Language Games to Possible Worlds

The basic idea of social construction is both simple and challenging. Further dimensions are revealed as we explore the broader reach of constructionist ideas. We begin with a focus on language, but as we shall find, our concerns rapidly broaden to include all forms of cultural life.

Language: From the Picture to the Practice

Where knowledge is concerned we have long treated language as a form of picture. When scientists tell us about the world, we expect their words to be accurate portrayals of their observations. In the same way we search for news reports that give an accurate depiction of events. While this seems obvious enough, consider again. Take the simple process of naming. There is Frank, Sally, Ben and Shawn. Now these individuals were scarcely born into the world with nametags. Their parents assigned their names. In this sense, they are arbitrary. Except perhaps for family traditions, for example, Frank could have been named Ben, Robert, Donald or something else. But why were they given names in the first place? The most important reason is practicality. For example, parents want to talk about Sally's welfare; is she eating properly, does her diaper need changing, is her brother Frank jealous of her? In effect, the parents require the name to carry out practices of good parenting; and later they will need the name for other practical purposes, like enrolling her in school and asking why she is out so late. More broadly, the words we use — just like the names we

give to each other — are used to carry out relationships. They are not pictures of the world, but practical actions in the world.

This is easy enough to understand in the case of words like "Stop," "Danger!" or "Throw me the ball." And you can begin to see how our use of common names is socially useful. However, it is less obvious in the case of news reports, scientific accounts or telling someone about your day. Here the words seem to function like pictures, and they can be checked for accuracy. But consider again: *whether an account seems "accurate" will depend on a communal tradition*. Recall the example of the many "you's" earlier in the chapter. Each tradition has its own criteria of judgment. Thus, whether we think a witness in a trial is telling the truth depends on whether he or she uses language the same way we do. Whether "developers" are creating new neighborhoods or destroying open spaces depends upon what one means by "develop." In this sense, to "speak the truth" is to speak in a way that supports a particular community's traditions.

Language Games and the Limits of Our World

The famous philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, introduced the metaphor of the language game. The metaphor enabled him to show how the words we use are embedded within systems of rules or shared conventions. This is easy enough to see in the case of grammar. Common rules will not allow us to say, "she go in beach," or "ball hit he." However, in any culture there are many different language games, that is, local conventions for describing and explaining. And, when you participate in the local convention, your freedom

of speech is radically limited. For example, in the case of the different "you's", each group relies on a different language game. Biologists are immersed in different language games from physicists, bankers or priests. When they come to describe you, they each play by different rules. Each makes good sense within his or her game. But to enter any of these cultures and play by different rules is perilous. You can scarcely ask a biologist about the soul of a frog, or a hairdresser about the atomic composition of a curl, without raising questions about your sanity.

Yet, we are not dealing here with the rules for language alone. Words are typically embedded in our activities, in the way we move or dress, or the objects we carry and what we do with them. In the game of chess, for example, we speak of "pawns," "rooks," "checkmate" and so on. Yet, you cannot simply walk down the street shouting, "Checkmate!" without raising a few eyebrows. The sentence only makes sense when people are carrying out certain prescribed activities using prescribed objects. This is also to say that the words we use inform people of the actions they should take. If we point to an object and call it a "chair," you may feel no reservations in taking a seat; if we call it a "precious antique," you will probably sit somewhere else. For the constructionist, then, we are invited into a double listening: for content and for consequence.

In Wittgenstein's terms our "language games," are embedded in broader patterns of activity that he called *forms of life*. In effect, biologists, hairdressers and bankers are engaged in different forms of life. Words help to hold their different forms of life together, and the forms of life simultaneously give the words their significance.

At the same time, these forms of life begin to form the limits of our worlds.

The Real as the Good

All of us are taught the difference between facts and values. We learn that facts are the "hard stuff," statements of evidence — objective and unbiased by desires, politics, religion and so on. In contrast, we learn that values are soft and subjective; they are without any solid foundation, simply representing the private investments of the individual. We should all agree on the facts; but everyone is entitled to their own values. *Social constructionism challenges this long-standing distinction.*

To appreciate the argument, consider three different newspaper headlines describing events when Saddam Hussein's Iraqi regime collapsed in 2003:

- U.S. Troops Victorious in Baghdad
- The American Empire Claims Victory in Iraq
- Iraqi Forces in Hiding as Americans Occupy Baghdad

Each of these headlines attempts to describe "what happened in Iraq," but they differ significantly in implications. The first, from an American paper, simply treats the Americans as victors. It is self-congratulatory. The second, reflecting the views of a Brazilian newspaper, uses the term "Empire" in derision, indicating that victory is only a claim. The future may prove otherwise. The final headline, reflecting views in some Arab countries, suggests that the "victory" is only a temporary "occupation;" Iraqi forces are hiding out within the civilian population, readied for return when

the Americans depart. The events to which these stories refer may be identical. However, the description of "the facts" depends on the tradition in which one is writing. And each tradition carries with it its own values. All factual descriptions, then, sustain some tradition of value — for good or ill. In this sense, there are no value-free descriptions.

You may object, "Certainly the facts of the natural sciences are value neutral?" But consider again. Why do we accept the fact that medical science "cures" disease as unbiased? This is largely because we place a value on certain changes that doctors help to bring about in the body. This value is represented in the word, "cure;" if someone talked about the same actions of the profession as "interfering with nature's ways," we would see it as biased. In the same way, if you reduce the world to the language of physics, chemistry or biology, the language of "moral action" ceases to exist. If you continue to talk in scientific terms alone, dropping an atomic bomb on Nagasaki or conducting biological experiments with prisoners in concentration camps is not about "murder" or "morality." Such words are irrelevant to the science as such. And, in the same way, military forces may attack a country and simply talk about the thousands of civilians who are killed as "collateral damage." The natural sciences do have values; they analyze data in ways that allow them to achieve the ends of prediction and control; their discourses are tied to these purposes. If one remains solely within a given tradition, other traditions of value are simply irrelevant or suppressed.

Radical Pluralism

Most people are willing to agree that many of our categories are socially constructed. We all know that there are interminable disagreements on what constitutes "justice," "morality" or "love." However, many people resist constructionist ideas when it comes to the physical world, the pre-linguistic world of the directly observable. Is it true or false that the moon is made of blue cheese? How foolish to answer, "true." And isn't it equally obvious that the world is round and that the seasons in New England change? But consider again: if what we take to be real derives from communal agreement, then claims to truth must be located within these relationships. Or, to repeat, truth is only found within community. Beyond community there is silence. In this sense, social constructionists do not embrace universal truths, or Truth with a capital T, sometimes called Transcendental Truth.

To be sure, there is truth with a small t, that is, truth that issues from the shared ways of life within a group. Sometimes that group can be huge, as in the group that usually states that $2 + 2 = 4$. If a child says the answer was 3, correction soon follows. Mathematicians could say, however, that 4 is only true as long as the base of the mathematical system is 10. If it were otherwise, the answer would not be 4. The division of people into two sexes, male and female, is commonly accepted. However, there are some cultures that construct a third sex, intermediate between female and male. The notion of races is also one developed within communities and in some cultures, classes or caste systems have divided the higher

and lower social positions. So, to return to the question of whether the moon is made of blue cheese or something else, the answer depends upon the community in which we are engaged. In a poetic frame we might even say the moon is the ancient goddess, Diana.

The idea of truth within community is of enormous consequence. As we have seen, all constructions of the real are embedded within ways of life, and all ways of life are value invested. This means that claims to truth are invariably wedded to traditions of value. Thus, it is important within a community of rocket scientists to know whether it is true or false that a rocket will follow a certain trajectory; this truth is wedded to the value they place on safely reaching a destination. Psychiatrists attempt to know the truth about mental illness; this search is tied to the values they place on what they consider normal ways of life.

Our troubles begin, however, when local claims to truth (t) are treated as transcendental truth (T), when one community claims that the world was created by a Big Bang and another by a Big God, when one claims that homosexuality is a disorder and another that it is a normal human activity, or one claims that all behavior is determined and another that people have free will. Like most claims to knowledge, the humility of the local is replaced by the arrogance of the universal.

Social constructionism frees us from the task of trying to decide which tradition, set of values, religions, political ideologies, or ethics is ultimately or transcendentally True or Right. From a constructionist perspective, all may be valid for some group of people. Constructionist ideas invite a radical pluralism, that is, an

openness to many ways of naming and valuing. Because there is no foundation for claiming superiority of one's own tradition, one is invited into a posture of curiosity and respect for others. What do other traditions offer that are not contained in one's own, what can be shared of our own that may be of value to others?

Of course, a pluralist view such as this is easier to espouse in the abstract than in the hurly burly of everyday life. We can scarcely rest silent in the face of what we see as the prejudice, oppression, injustice and brutality in today's world. However, for the constructionist, the inclination to stamp out what we despise is a move in the wrong direction. It is Truth in operation. Rather, the constructionist is more likely to favor forms of dialogue out of which new realities and values might emerge. The challenge is not to locate "the one best way," but to create the kinds of relationships in which we can collaboratively build our future. We shall say more about such relationships in Chapter 3.

Science vs. Religion?

Most scientists believe that there is a real, material world, independent of people; that it is possible to discover that world through systematic measurement (telescopes, microscopes, etc.); and, that it is possible to represent that world accurately through symbolic systems, including language and mathematical formulas. Scientists usually argue that through their methods they are able to come to closer and closer approximations to the world as it truly is. The successes that scientific enterprises have achieved, from the eradication of fatal diseases to the harnessing of atomic energy, have

lead many to accept the power of science to reveal the Truth about the world.

Constructionist ideas do not at all devalue the scientific enterprise, but they do challenge the idea that science reveals Truth. Nor do the fruits of science justify any such claims. An effective practice of therapy, for example, does not render True the words that are used in describing or explaining the practice. This is an important point because for several hundred years claims to scientific Truth has been used to discredit the claims of religious or spiritual traditions. Science has served as a wedge in a power struggle in which societal control has been wrested away from religious institutions. Science deals in truth, it is said, where religious and spiritual traditions are based on fantasy or myth.

Constructionism provides a new way of seeing this antagonism: Scientific and religious/spiritual traditions each have their own ways of constructing the world; each harbors certain values and favor certain ways of life. There is no comparing the truth of these traditions against the truth of science directly. Any such measurement would necessarily take place within the constructed reality of some tradition. We cannot measure the truth of the spirit through scientific means any more than we can assess the truth of science through a spiritual sensitivity. And too, both traditions bring forth fruits in their own terms — rockets to the moon and atomic power in the former case, for example, and institutions of humane concern and visions of the moral good in the latter. Neither, within its own terms, can produce what the other offers. Constructionism asks us to eliminate the traditional opposition: Science vs. Religion.

Rather, we move to a position of both/and, where we are invited to explore from many standpoints both the positive and negative consequences of each.

Summary Focus

We may view social constructionism as a continuing dialogue on the sources of what we take to be knowledge of the real, the rational, the true, and the good — in effect, all that is meaningful in life. You may find it useful here to think of constructionist ideas as an umbrella under which all traditions of meaning and action are sheltered. The constructionist umbrella allows us to move across the traditions, to appreciate, evaluate, absorb, amalgamate and recreate. At the same time, constructionist ideas themselves must be given a place under the umbrella. They too must avoid claims to transcendent Truth. As we write these words, we are also striving to generate meaning together with you, the reader. The important question is not whether our words are true or objective, but rather what happens to our lives when we enter this form of understanding? As we shall hope to show, many new and promising pathways stand before us.