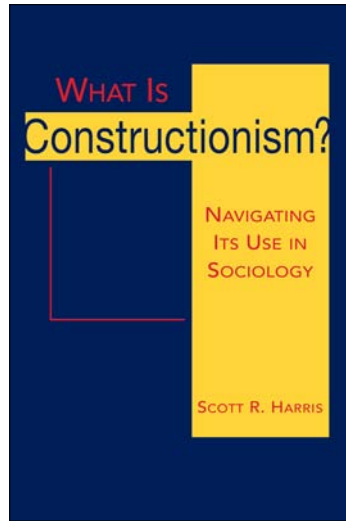


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What Is  
Constructionism?  
Navigating Its Use  
in Sociology

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# 1

## Introduction

Social constructionism occupies a prominent place in sociology and the social sciences in general. Since the term was popularized by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's 1966 book *The Social Construction of Reality*, a substantively, methodologically, and theoretically diverse array of scholars have conducted research under the general rubric of constructionism. These constructionists have made significant contributions to the study of deviance, social problems, social movements, the self, gender, race, education, health, emotions, family, and other areas. As a simple library search indicates, there is a large and growing number of sociological books and articles titled *The Social Construction of X* or simply *Constructing X* (see Best 2000; Hacking 1999; Spector and Kitsuse 1977). The list grows exponentially when one considers constructionist works that are not explicitly titled as such or that employ synonyms for constructing, such as assembling, building, crafting, fabricating, fashioning, forming, making, manufacturing, and producing. Terms that merely signal agency or creativity—accomplishing, becoming, discovering, doing, inventing, managing—are also popular concepts in constructionist titles and analyses. Constructionists enjoy gerunds. They use them to highlight the recurring processes (Prus 1996), strategies (Lofland 1976), and practices (Gubrium and Holstein 1997) through which people actively generate, maintain, and transform reality.

Not all commentators consider the proliferation of constructionist analyses to be an entirely positive development, however. Philosopher and social theorist Ian Hacking (1999) has suggested that there is a great deal of vague thinking and superficial “bandwagon jumping” in these ostensibly constructionist analyses (see also Hollander and Gordon 2006). David Maines (2001, 2003) has argued that the adjective

*constructionist* too often serves as an empty rhetorical device, as virtually all sociological analyses rest on the assumption that social life is somehow “constructed.”

The concept of “constructing” is too entrenched and important to be dispensed with, however. What is needed is not the dismissal of that metaphor but more precise, careful, and self-conscious applications of it in authors’ works. Constructionists need to specify their particular brands of constructionism. Readers, too, could bring more critical and discerning mind-sets to constructionist research.

Whereas others have dealt with the intellectual history and philosophical foundations of constructionism (Best 2008; Weinberg 2008), this book focuses on two general forms of constructionism that are most frequently confused in the literature: *objective social constructionism* (OSC) and *interpretive social constructionism* (ISC). These are not currently accepted terms, but I believe they are helpful in distinguishing two dominant and competing (if only implicit) uses of the constructionist perspective.

This distinction between OSC and ISC is at first glance relatively simple to understand. Yet its implications are broad, and many complexities appear upon closer inspection. Interpretive and objective constructionists may use almost identical language to advance very different arguments. At the same time, there are overlapping concerns between the two approaches, and there can be intricate connections between the processes and outcomes of the interpretive and objective construction of social life (see Gubrium and Holstein 1997; Hacking 1999; Loseke 1999).

## Interpretive Social Constructionism

*Interpretive social constructionism* is frankly what I consider the more radical form of constructionism. It has roots in a number of diverse traditions, especially pragmatism, symbolic interactionism, phenomenology, and ethnomethodology.<sup>1</sup> Other orientations and developments, such as narrative analysis, cognitive sociology, semiotic sociology, and post-modernism also sometimes derive from and contribute to what might be called the interpretive constructionist movement.<sup>2</sup>

Although these approaches are sometimes difficult to define and compare, and are by no means equivalent, it is possible to identify some fairly common themes. I begin by focusing on one in particular. For many scholars, the core principle of ISC is the idea that “the meaning of things is not inherent.” This assumption is reflected in Herbert Blumer’s

(1969, pp. 2–6) fundamental premises of symbolic interactionism, in which he argues that meanings are created, learned, used, and revised in social interaction. All objects—“objects” being cows, chairs, actions, selves, social problems, decades, or anything else that can be referred to—derive their meaning from the purposes and perspectives that people bring to them (Blumer 1969; Mead 1934). Alfred Schutz’s (1964, p. 227) phenomenological sociology also presumes the “ambivalence of the meaning of all social phenomena,” as does the ethnomethodological argument that descriptions “reflexively” constitute the situations they appear to report about—even as those descriptions “indexically” derive their sense from the circumstances surrounding their use (Coulon 1995, p. 23; Heritage 1984, p. 140).

Similarly, when Berger and Luckmann (1966) initially formulated the social constructionist project, the issue of meaning was central to it. Their goal was to expand the sociology of knowledge—previously pre-occupied with abstract ideas, philosophies, and the like—to the realm of everyday life:

The sociology of knowledge must first of all concern itself with what people “know” as “reality” in their everyday, non- or pre-theoretical lives. In other words, commonsense “knowledge” . . . must be the central focus. . . . It is precisely this “knowledge” that constitutes the fabric of meanings without which no society could exist. The sociology of knowledge, therefore, must concern itself with the social construction of reality. (Berger and Luckmann 1966, p. 15)

Their frequent use (including scare quotes) of the terms “knowledge” and “reality” indicate that Berger and Luckmann were taking a highly relativistic stance toward issues of truth. What is “constructed,” in their initial formulation of the constructionist perspective, was first and foremost the meaning of things.

For interpretive constructionists, the premise “meaning is not inherent” applies to everything. Although there may be some limits to what humans can get away with—for example, a chair usually cannot be eaten as food and others may sanction an individual for trying—there are always many purposes and perspectives that people can bring to things that interest them. What is taken to be a simple chair could be used as a strange weapon, as something to stand on, as something to burn or to sell, and so on (Blumer 1969, p. 69). It might be viewed or described as beautiful or ugly or plain, as cheap or expensive or moderately priced, as an ordinary seat or a place of honor. A chair might be vaguely noticed but deemed irrelevant. And what holds for such a relatively simple and non-

controversial item of experience also holds for more complex and contentious examples. A war, a political leader, tattoos, animal cruelty, homelessness—the meaning of these and everything else is contingent on the actions of people, who must supply classifications, interpretations, and narratives to make sense of them.

Whole schools of interpretive constructionist thought have been founded on or at least inspired by the idea that meaning is not inherent. ISC studies of self-identity often hinge on the assumption that “who we are” is a socially created idea, negotiated in interaction (Gubrium and Holstein 2001; Vryan, Adler, and Adler 2003). ISC studies of deviance frequently assume that no behavior or personal attribute is inherently deviant, that people’s actions and appearance must be defined as deviant to be seen that way (Becker 1973, p. 9; Herman-Kinney 2003; but see also Pollner’s [1987] critique of Becker). ISC studies of family are sometimes premised on the idea that “family” can be defined in a number of different ways, that no set of social bonds are inherently familial or nonfamilial, and that there are no incontestable versions of what is going on in any particular family relationship (Gubrium and Holstein 1990; Knapp 1999, 2002). ISC studies of social problems regularly assume that no social issue is troubling exactly as someone says it is, that interpretive claimsmaking gives order to indeterminate states of affairs (Blumer 1971; Schneider 1985; Spector and Kitsuse 1977).

Thus, ISC analyses tend to assume or argue that social phenomena are *interpreted* entities whose existence and qualities are dependent in large part on people’s meaning-making practices. Human beings are construction workers in the sense that they create (or assemble, build, manufacture) meaning. Just as there is virtually always more than one way to build something, there is virtually always more than one way to define something. ISC scholars usually argue or assume that a particular understanding of “X” is not the only understanding possible, that what is taken as the “truth” of the matter depends on people’s agendas and orientations. Everything can be seen or described or used in different ways. Interpretation is not a completely spontaneous or random process, however. It is guided by material and conceptual resources at individuals’ disposal and conditioned by social and physical constraints (Gubrium and Holstein 1997, chap. 8).

Again, this one simple yet profound theme—meaning is not inherent—is arguably the core principle of interpretive social constructionism. There are many other ideas associated with ISC, but all of them tend to cohere around the creation of meaning as the central guiding concern.

Interpretive constructionists believe that researchers ought to study the meanings people live by and how those meanings are created. They are wary of methodologies and approaches that lead researchers to impose meanings onto those they study, rather than investigating meanings (Blumer 1969). They are not principally concerned with discovering what things “really” mean in order to dispel myths or correct misunderstandings (Berger and Luckmann 1966, p. 12). They try to suspend belief *and* disbelief in reality (Schutz 1970) in order to examine how meaning and reality are produced by and for members of various social settings (Garfinkel 1967).

### **Objective Social Constructionism**

*Objective social constructionism* is different from what I have just described. Although important and useful, OSC arguments do not focus on the creation of meaning, or at least not to the extent that ISC arguments do.<sup>3</sup> For OSC analyses, what are made, built, or assembled are not interpretations but (for lack of a better phrase) real states of affairs. As a result, OSC arguments can be made without necessarily attending so much to what things mean to actors and the intricate processes through which those diverse meanings are created; OSC arguments can be made without suspending belief in the existence of the world as the analyst sees it.

OSC has roots in a broad range of sociological perspectives, too diverse and numerous to specify beyond the examples I provide later. Moreover, many scholars who take an interpretive constructionist approach to some issues take an objective constructionist approach to other issues, even in the same report. ISC and OSC analyses are often interwoven in complex and even contradictory ways. But to put it simply: OSC deals with the creation of “real things” as opposed to “meanings.” Consequently, OSC is reflected in any arguments that suggest that real social phenomena (e.g., actual family relationships vs. interpretations of putative relationships) are produced by the actions of individual actors and groups, by constraining social forces, by the operations of class, race, gender, politics, or religion, and so on. Culture and interpretation may play a role in an OSC analysis, but only insofar as these issues can be put to use in a more standard sociological account of what is really going on and why it is happening. For example, authors who identify “self-fulfilling prophecies” often incorporate an element of interpretation into their analyses, but they may do so within a framework that takes for granted the meaning of virtually everything in order

to enter debates over the real causes of social behavior (e.g., Watzlawick 2006). In the hands of somewhat more interpretive scholars, arguments about self-fulfilling prophecies may occupy an ambiguous middle ground between objective and interpretive constructionism (e.g., Loseke 1999, pp. 167–168). But again, simply put, objective constructionists argue that something is “socially constructed” when a real phenomenon (as opposed to an interpretation or meaning) derives its existence or its dimensions from other social factors.

When Maines (2003) argues that all sociology is constructionist, it is largely OSC that he has in mind:

Sociology’s fundamental domain proposition is that some combination of social things cause or are related to some other combination of social things. Insert whatever variables, factors, elements, or “constructed social realities” one wants, and the proposition holds. Parents influence their children through communication; inner-city schools disadvantage inner-city students; unemployment goes up when the economy shrinks; mobility opportunities are lower at the top and bottom of class systems; personal identities are expressed through narratives; divorce tends to have an array of negative effects on the children of divorced parents; and electronic and visual media technologies tend to give the capitalist class an advantage. We all know that [all of these factors] have been historically created and that they undergo change in different ways and at different rates, and that even some of them (e.g., television, cities, capitalism, schools) at one time did not exist at all. (p. 16)

This statement leans heavily toward the OSC side of the OSC/ISC continuum. The phrase “personal identities are expressed through narratives” seems potentially interpretive-constructionist, as long as the verb “expressed” is read in a meaningmaking way. Most of the other examples in Maines’s list refer to the objective construction of social life—that is, to the creation of real states of affairs through the operation of various social forces. If this is social constructionism, then sociology truly is thoroughly constructionist and has been since its inception. Sociologists always have and probably always will try to explain *why things occur as they do*. However, this form of analysis overlaps with, but is far from identical to, the ISC focus on *how things are defined as they are*.

Take Maines’s examples that “inner-city schools disadvantage inner-city students” and that “divorce tends to have an array of negative effects on the children of divorced parents.” These kinds of arguments may employ verbs that imply a constructionist analysis—as in *manufacturing* students’ careers, the social *creation* of children’s experi-

ences, or perhaps the *making* of delinquents. But this is fairly standard social-scientific thinking and is certainly *not* what rigorously interpretive scholars would call “constructionist.” An ISC scholar would more likely focus on how these issues are interpretively constituted—that is, given meaning. For example, a social problems constructionist in the tradition of Malcolm Spector and John Kitsuse (1977) would study the different claims that are made about the issue of inner-city schools. The researcher would examine the diverse meanings that various claims-makers create as they proffer competing interpretations of the putative problem at hand, the supposed causes and effects of the problem, the suggested solutions to the problem, and so on. An ISC scholar would study how narratives—those told by everyday folk as well as by OSC scholars—create meaning by making assertions about actors, motives, conditions, causes, effects, and remedies.

Certainly, an ISC scholar may be tempted to argue that meaningmaking can lead to real, observable changes in a society. This type of argument has been a feature of ISC and OSC thought for decades. It takes us back to the middle ground I mentioned with respect to self-fulfilling prophecies. Blumer’s first premise of interactionism (“People act based on what things mean to them”) and William I. Thomas’s oft-cited theorem (“If people define things as real, they are real in their consequences”) both imply a simultaneous concern with meaning and with objective reality. Berger and Luckmann (1966, p. 91) also encouraged analyses that considered the dialectical relationship between what people do and what they think. Controversies over constructionists’ selective relativism (Best 2003; Ibarra and Kitsuse 2003; Woolgar and Pawluch 1985) and solutions such as “analytical bracketing” (Holstein and Gubrium 2003) in large part also point to the ambiguous overlaps and “interactions” (Hacking 1999, p. 31; see also Loseke 1999, chaps. 6–7) between what I am calling objective and interpretive constructionism.

My first priority in this chapter is not to clarify the ambiguous middle ground between ISC and OSC. Instead, my main goal is to describe these two forms of sociological constructionism in a somewhat stark but clear manner, so that the differences between them can be appreciated. I want to reach a broad audience with a simple point: More sociologists need to recognize that the exact same constructionist language can be used in (at least) two very different kinds of analyses. Only then, once a clear image of each approach is apprehended, might readers better trace the complex moves that researchers sometimes make as they combine or alternate between one form of analysis and the other.



## Objective and Interpretive Constructionism: Common Vocabularies, Different Arguments

In this section, I further explain the difference between OSC and ISC by focusing on the vocabulary that analysts use in parallel but conflicting fashion. My discussion centers on four key terms—contingency, essentialism, reification, and work—but will touch on other central constructionist concepts as well. Though OSC and ISC rely on the same terms and make similar-sounding arguments, there are often vast differences that go unrecognized. I wish to make these differences unambiguously apparent. Moreover, as an interpretive constructionist, I want to advocate more consistent and self-conscious usage of the ISC perspective. In order to pursue these goals, I draw examples from widely read textbooks and anthologies, as well as journal articles and monographs. Given my own research interests, I pay most attention to constructionist writings on family, inequality, and social problems.

### *Contingency*

Both ISC and OSC are in superficial agreement about the contingent nature of social life. The foil for constructionist analyses tends to be arguments, whether advanced by laypersons or scholars, that treat social phenomena as natural, inherent, or automatic. As Hacking (1999, p. 12) has noted, constructionists of all sorts typically argue that what some people may take for granted and treat as inevitable actually should not be seen that way. But what is contingent? Interpretations or objective realities?

For an OSC analysis, what is contingent is some real trait, behavior, or state of affairs. Consider the following example from a widely read text on sociological social psychology. The passage uses constructionist verbs but leans much more toward OSC than ISC:

Social institutions are *created* and *maintained* through the active participation of individuals. To the extent that we are aware of our reasons for participating in various cultural productions, we can be said to be mindfully engaged in the *construction* of reality. . . . Imagine [an attorney] explaining to her spouse and children that she does not have time to celebrate birthdays and anniversaries because she is busy fighting for an important social cause. She is often absent from family meals and other everyday rituals as well. One day she awakens to the discovery that she is no longer meaningfully engaged with her family—they seem to be living their lives without her. This example illustrates the simple but profound point that if we do not actively participate in the *production* of

those realities that we wish to maintain . . . they will be eroded by the forces of entropy. (O'Brien 2006, p. 517; emphasis added)

This passage suggests that close relationships are “constructed”—created, maintained, produced—by the careful effort people put into them. The argument is that even familial relationships are not automatic or inevitable and cannot be taken for granted. This is a useful way of thinking about things, but in my opinion is not as *interpretive* as it could be. It lies closer to the other end of the OSC-ISC continuum.<sup>4</sup>

ISC analyses employ a different and (in my view) deeper sense of contingency.<sup>5</sup> In their book *What Is Family?* Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein (1990) adopt a more thoroughly and consistently interpretive form of constructionism. They are interested in how people *define* family affairs, an issue that arguably precedes discussions of whether a family exists, what qualities it may have, and what causal factors shape it. Here contingency centers on meaning: The meaning of any (putative) familial relationship is not inherent. According to Gubrium and Holstein’s version of constructionism, people define the family into and out of being through their interpretive practices. People assign various qualities to families (e.g., closeness, distance, normality, deviance) as they think and talk about ambiguous states of affairs. It is in this different sense that the authors use the exact same verbs “construct” and “produce”: “We offer a view of family as a socially constructed object, a product of decidedly public actions and interactions” (1990, p. 12).

Consider an example derived from Gubrium and Holstein’s (1990) observations of a family/patient support group. A father and his twenty-two-year-old son with schizophrenia offer competing interpretations of the closeness of their relationship, as well as the behavior and motivations of the son. The father accuses the son of (among other things) not being around very often and then of being quiet and surly when he is present. The father assembles these three potential “facts”—absence, silence, surliness—into a narrative that his son was more a stranger than a loving family member. In response, the son recasts the same biographical elements into a different pattern. In the son’s account, absence and silence and surliness are portrayed as signs of love as well as struggles with mental illness, not as signs of alienation or disloyalty. The son says:

Come on. You know I care. It’s just hard for me. I come by, but I don’t want to start you worrying, so I don’t say too much. I don’t want to complain because I don’t want you to think that I’m not doing okay. I

thought I was doing something good for you by trying to stay out of your hair. . . . I get pretty screwed up sometimes, so I try to stay away when I might have a bad day. (Gubrium and Holstein 1990, p. 59)

Thus, what Gubrium and Holstein are focusing on here is not the same kind of contingency as in the previous case. In O'Brien's example, what is contingent are real families, whose existence and qualities are not inevitable. This sort of objective contingency is common in the literature on families, whether the contingent factors are wide-scale cultural and economic conditions or the daily choices of spouses (e.g., Carrington 2004; Hochschild 1989). In Gubrium and Holstein's example, family again is contingent, but this time it is the meaning of family that is not inevitable and that must be constructed. This sort of interpretive contingency is somewhat less common in the literature, but it also has been pursued (e.g., Harris 2006b; Knapp 1999; Loseke 1987; Miller 1991).

### *Essentialism*

All constructionists tend to emphasize contingency and argue against the foil of inevitability, but there are different degrees of inevitability. A potentially weak sense of inevitability may exist when someone takes a phenomenon for granted and does not question why something appears to be the way it is. A stronger form of inevitability is reflected in "essentialism," the belief that some phenomenon has an essence or inherent nature that makes it what it is. But this term too can be put to different uses depending on the version of constructionism at hand. An OSC definition of essentialism would be one that launches analysts into debates over the real causes of real behavior. In *The Social Construction of Difference and Inequality*, Tracy Ore (2003, p. 5) offers this explanation:

[Essentialism is] the tenet that human behavior is "natural," predetermined by genetic, biological, or physiological mechanisms and thus not subject to change. Human behaviors that show some similarity are assumed [by nonconstructionists] to be expressions of an underlying human drive or tendency. In the United States, gender and sexuality are among the last realms to have their natural or biological status called into question.

This version of essentialism can lead to OSC because it encourages scholars to enter debates over *why* mundane behavior occurs. The "nature versus nurture" debate is often treated as "essentialism versus constructionism," but in my view that contrast elides the OSC/ISC distinction. ISC is not preoccupied with nature versus nurture. Interpretive constructionists

sidestep such debates in order to study more carefully what people *claim* to be the reasons for behavior, as well as how those claims are advanced, confirmed, and contested. In contrast, more objective constructionists try to separate myth from reality regarding human behavior, usually by arguing against innate tendencies.

For OSC, essentialism centers on the idea that people do what they do because it is in their nature: They are inherently nurturing, they possess natural genius or talent, or they are “born bad.” The objective constructionist counterargument is that these real behaviors and traits are not simply inherent but are created by social factors: Women may be expected and pressured to act nurturing (Bellas 2001; Crompton and Lyonette 2005); genius and talent may be produced by access to high-quality instruction and other social factors quite apart from the inborn capacities a person may have (Chambliss 1989; Scheff 2006); deviance and conformity can be seen as socially elicited actions rather than innate propensities (Agnew 2001; Becker 1973, pp. 26, 34). Although these sorts of OSC arguments are important, they are not the same as ISC arguments.

An interpretive constructionist take on essentialism focuses more squarely on the meaning of things—on how things are viewed or described—rather than on the causes of behavior. Representation, not causality, is the more central issue for ISC analyses.<sup>6</sup> Consequently, interpretive constructionism rebuts meaning-centered essentialism rather than causality-centered essentialism; its target are assertions that some actions (e.g., not wearing clothes, smoking pot, or even committing murder) are essentially or inherently wrong or that certain categories (e.g., the “alcoholic”) simply reflect real features of the world. Consider Goode’s (1994) definition of essentialism, from his text on deviance:

Essentialism is the view that all phenomena in the world have an indwelling “essence” that automatically and unambiguously places them in specific, more or less unchanging categories. . . . Essentialists are comfortable with using the terms “true” and “real” when referring to categories or their representatives. Certain inherent, unchanging characteristics define, for example, “true” alcoholism or “true” homosexuality. (Goode 1994, p. 32)

I don’t mean to imply that Goode’s large book is uniformly interpretive. But in this passage, in this definition, essentialism is portrayed in ISC terms. Classifications, not causes of behavior, are what are at stake. The question is not “What causes alcoholism?” or “What causes good parenting?” but rather “How do different people define what ‘alcoholism’ or ‘homosexuality’ mean and decide whether particular individuals should be described in those terms?”

For a classic ISC treatment of essentialism, consider Howard Becker's (1973) influential formulation of the labeling perspective on deviance. Although Becker wavers between a realist and a radically interpretive point of view (see Berard 2003; Pollner 1987), his famous dictum on deviance can be read as ISC. It is also interesting that he so long ago articulated in embryonic form the objective-interpretive distinction that is the subject of this chapter. Notice the dual meanings of the verb "create," as well as his argument against essentialism:

Deviance is *created* by society. I do not mean this in the way it is ordinarily understood, in which the causes of deviance are located in the social situation of the deviant or in "social factors" which prompt his action. I mean, rather, that social groups *create* deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance, and by applying those rules to particular people and labeling them as outsiders. From this point of view, deviance is *not* a quality of the act the person commits, but rather a consequence of the application by others of rules and sanctions to an "offender." The deviant is one to whom that label has successfully been applied; deviant behavior is behavior that people so label. (Becker 1973, p. 9; emphasis altered)

In this passage, the kind of essentialism that Becker is contrasting with constructionism is different than in Ore's (2003) case, mentioned earlier. Becker is arguing against absolutist notions of deviance and respectability, such as "public nudity *is* immoral" or "abortion *is* murder." An essentialist might consider public nudity or abortion to be morally wrong now and forever, irrespective of what human beings think about those actions. An interpretive constructionist would argue that meanings are never essential, because they are socially created. People define things as deviant, normal, and so on. The ISC agenda would then be to study in detail how those meanings are created (Holstein 1993), rather than to move quickly back to examining the real causes of deviant actions, as Becker (1973, pp. 26, 34) does.

### *Reification*

Along with essentialism, reification is a common antagonist for constructionist analyses. Berger and Luckmann (1966) provide a profound and oft-cited inspirational definition of reification, but one that can be read and used from either an OSC or an ISC perspective.

Reification is the apprehension of human phenomena as if they were things, that is, in non-human or possibly super-human terms. Another way of saying this is that reification is the apprehension of the *products*

of human activity as if they were something else than human *products*—such as facts of nature, results of cosmic laws, or manifestations of divine will. Reification implies that man is capable of forgetting his own authorship of the human world. (Berger and Luckmann 1966, p. 89; emphasis altered)

Notice the ambiguity surrounding the constructionist idea of “production.” What is being produced—actual social phenomena or interpretations of social phenomena?

For an objectivist, reification is treating an organization, a family, or inequality as if they were “things”—as if they existed outside of the interactions through which people created, enacted, and transformed them. Consider J. Kenneth Benson’s (1977) programmatic article on organizations. He argues that many conventional scholars treat organizations as if they had an “autonomous, determinate structure.” His constructionist approach, in contrast, treats organizations as always produced in an ongoing manner by human behavior: “Relationships are *formed*, roles are *constructed*, institutions are *built* from the encounters and confrontations of people in their daily round of life” (Benson 1977, p. 3; emphases added). These constructionist verbs seem to be used in a primarily objectivist manner as Benson argues against the reification of organizations (see also Hall 1987, p. 16).

Similarly, Michael Schwalbe and colleagues (2000, p. 420) critique sociologists who do not understand that “social entities”—and forms of inequality in particular—“must be understood as recurrent patterns of joint action.” For example, they argue that “class” is too often treated as a thing—an explanatory variable. Instead, class should be studied as “a situated construction, accomplished through people’s daily efforts to make a living; through struggles between workers and employers . . . ; and through cooperation among elites to control business, finance, and government” (2000, p. 441). Though the authors acknowledge the importance of meaning, their argument against reification seems in many ways more objectivist than interpretive.<sup>7</sup>

Melvin Pollner (1987) provides, in my view, an ISC understanding of reification. He cites the same passage from Berger and Luckmann that I quoted above, but gives it a much different spin. For Pollner (p. 100), reification occurs whenever people act or talk as if there are “determinate and objective or absolute entities”—that is, when someone posits an object whose meaning is independent of any human subject. As an example, Pollner describes how officers and judges act as if they are responding to an “independent field” of deviance, rather than (interactively) creating the meaning of behavior through their responses to it.

During the course of their everyday routines, these actors regularly reify deviance as a thing waiting to be found rather than an ongoing human product—“product” being an interpretation of indeterminate events. In contrast to Benson (1977) and Schwalbe and colleagues (2000), Pollner (1987) is not interested in how social interaction creates the real properties of organizations or class inequality; he is interested in how people convince themselves that there are “organizations” and “inequalities” as real, independent entities in the world.

When I have cited Berger and Luckmann (1966) in my own work on equality in marriage, I have also given their work a decidedly interpretive spin (Harris 2000a, p. 131). Objectivist researchers, I have argued, are prone to reification when they assume that marital equality and inequality exist in the world and that their job is to accurately define, measure, and explain those phenomena. Reification is evident whenever scholars specify the contingent factors, choices, and practices by which some couples succeed or fail at accomplishing marital equality (Blaisure and Allen 1995; Schwartz 1994). In contrast, a constructionist would de-reify equality in order to focus on the contingent *definitional* processes that bring equality and inequality into being (Harris 2006b, p. 8).<sup>8</sup> Here, marital equality and inequality are both *interpretive* accomplishments—that is, meanings. Although this approach strikes some as cynical and detached, it can more favorably be seen as a way to respect and study the truths people live by. What are the different ways that people define “marital equality”? How do they interpret ambiguous instances as examples of “power,” “labor,” “respect,” or whatever else they regard important to equality? How does the issue of equality/inequality actually enter people’s lived experiences? These are the questions I asked, which are more reflective of ISC than OSC (see Chapter 5).

### Work

As constructionists highlight contingency and argue against essentialism and reification, they often do so by documenting the important kinds of “work” that human beings do. Reality is not automatic, natural, or self-generating; it is created by people’s actions. This broad premise has led to the development of many interesting concepts that build directly on the metaphor of humans as construction workers. Here is an incomplete list:

- authenticity work (Gubrium and Holstein 2009b)
- beauty work (Kuan and Trautner 2009)

- biographical work (Holstein and Gubrium 2000)
- body work (Gimlin 2002)
- border work (Thorne 1993)
- boundary work (Lamont and Molnár 2002)
- care work (Herd and Meyer 2002)
- category work (Ryen and Silverman 2000)
- character work (Holyfield and Fine 1997)
- control work (Ortiz 2006)
- conversational work and interactional work (Fishman 1978)
- dream work (Nelson 2001)
- edge work (Lyng 1990)
- emotion work (Hochschild 1979)
- ethnicity work (Berbrier 2000)
- identity work (Snow and Anderson 1987)
- ideological work (Berger 1981)
- image work and influence work (Prus 1999)
- kin work (Stack and Burton 1993)
- membership work (Baker 1984)
- mind work (Owens 2007)
- money work (Schweingruber and Berns 2003)
- narrative work (Gubrium and Holstein 2009a)
- nature work (Fine 1997)
- rape work (Martin 2005)
- reality work and time work (Flaherty 1984, 2003)
- recognition work and response work (Ferris 2004)
- rights work (Plummer 2006)
- risk work (Horlick-Jones 2005)
- self work (Spencer 1992)
- semiotic work (Bakker and Bakker 2006)
- sex work (Seidman 2003)
- social problems work (Holstein and Miller 2003)
- somatic work (Waskul and Vannini 2008)
- surgical work (Pope 2002)
- symbolic work (Wanderer 1987)
- teamwork, face work, and remedial work (Goffman 1959, 1967, 1971)
- thought work, family work, food work, sociability work, and support work (Devault 1991)
- trajectory work, awareness context work, composure work, rectification work, sentimental work, and trust work (Strauss et al. 1982)



The kinds of work that these concepts imply are somewhat diverse, but they can be placed along the objective-interpretive continuum I highlighted earlier. Consider the concepts of *conversational work* and *thought work*. Both emerged out of feminist analyses that sought to bring recognition to women's important contributions to social life. In Pamela Fishman's (1978) and Marjorie Devault's (1991) analyses, the authors document the often invisible work (Daniels 1987) that women perform in their close relationships. Fishman (1978) carefully describes how women actively maintain conversations via subtle comments such as "Mmm," "Oh?" and "Yeah?" Women do more of this interactional work, Fishman argues, and it is largely unnoticed and taken for granted. Devault (1991), in turn, highlights the planning and organizing that women (more than men) put into feeding their families. Such work goes well beyond selecting recipes and making shopping lists and includes frequently taken-for-granted actions such as attending to the contradictory food preferences of family members, maintaining variety, budgeting, fostering a desired mood at the table, and so on. The construction metaphor implicit in these two examples seems to be: just as it takes time, effort, and planning to build a real chair, it takes time, effort, and planning to feed one's family or to conduct an intimate conversation. Family meals and ordinary conversations, like chairs, do not exist automatically or inevitably. They all are dependent on the efforts of human beings.

Although useful and insightful, these conceptions of work seem potentially more objective than interpretive. Fishman's (1978) *interactional work* includes efforts that keep a real conversation going. Devault's (1991) *thought work* includes efforts that help put real food on the table. Much in these analyses does not entail a thoroughgoing bracketing of social reality and a consistent focus on the creation of meaning.<sup>9</sup> A more interpretive constructionist would probably not employ the concept of work in order to argue that our society should recognize as laborious some activities that have previously been classified as nonwork, such as volunteering, caring, and emoting (Daniels 1987, p. 413). An interpretive constructionist would probably not, at least not under the guise of analysis, enter debates over what the public should count as important or real labor. Such debates about the objective status of work rely on the various kinds of interpretive work in which ISC is interested (see also Besen 2006; Gusfield 1984; Spector and Kitsuse 1977, pp. 70–71).

Whereas OSC analyses tend to focus on the work it takes to create reality, ISC analyses tend to focus on the work it takes to create a sense of reality. This latter version of work is reflected more prominently in

some of the concepts I listed previously. Discursive constructionists, such as those associated with the concepts of *social problems work* (Holstein and Miller 2003; Loseke 1999, pp. 19, 198–199) and *biographical work* (Holstein and Gubrium 2000), usually try to bracket as much of a social issue as possible—the actors, actions, conditions, and causes—in order to examine how they are categorized and given meaning. For example, analyses of social problems work might consider how people types (e.g., the “inexpressive male” or the “battered woman”) are invented and popularized, as well as how these categories are employed to make sense out of ambiguous situations in everyday life (e.g., Loseke 1987, 2003). Analyses of biographical work might examine how past conversational actions (such as silence, interrupting, yelling, active listening) are given meaning by a spouse’s, friend’s, or therapist’s narrative. An interpretive constructionist would emphasize the work it takes to link behavioral incidents into a meaningful pattern. Any social situation—a conversation, a family meal, or any other—contains “a number of evanescent, ambiguous difficulties” that may or may not be noticed and defined as some sort of “trouble” (Emerson and Messinger 1977, p. 121). The process of selecting, classifying, and narrating elements of experience is the interpretive work that ISC analyses focus on (Gubrium and Holstein 1997, p. 147; Riessman 2002). OSC scholars tend to assume or act as if they hold primary responsibility for this kind of work, rather than highlighting how members get the job done.

## Concluding Thoughts

I want to make three final points about the OSC-ISC distinction. First, the difference between objective and interpretive constructionism is a matter of degree. It is unlikely that any author or report could be placed utterly at one end or the other of this continuum. I have never met or read a truly naïve realist who would deny that multiple interpretations are sometimes plausible or that some descriptors are merely arbitrary conventional symbols. Given the rise and influence of interpretive constructionism, it seems unlikely that even the most structural, quantitative, positivistic scholar would not express some recognition of the importance of meaning, culture, perspectives, and related constructionist notions. Indeed, Maines (2001) and Paul Atkinson and William Housley (2003) argue that many interactionist and constructionist ideas have pervasively infiltrated mainstream sociology, even if not all sociologists explicitly acknowledge the intellectual heritage of those ideas.

At the same time, an utterly interpretive constructionism also seems unlikely. As debates within the social problems literature have clarified, it is impossible for a scholar to bracket everything at once (Best 2003; Woolgar and Pawluch 1985). At least some assumptions about objective reality must enter even the strictest constructionist analyses.<sup>10</sup> James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium's (2003) solution to this dilemma is for interpretive constructionists to be deliberate, minimalist, and explicit as they import realist assumptions into their analyses, in order to highlight the local contextual factors that shape (and are shaped by) interpretations. Rather than attempting a wholesale bracketing of social reality, Holstein and Gubrium recommend a strategic "analytic bracketing" that alternates between the concrete "whats" and constitutive "hows" of social reality (Holstein and Gubrium 2008). Other interpretive constructionists recommend moving somewhat further toward objectivism. Joel Best (2003) expresses confidence in analysts' abilities to focus on meaningmaking while simultaneously comparing lay interpretations with the "facts" of the matter and locating those interpretations within larger structural contexts.

My second point flows from the first: The fact that the difference between OSC and ISC is only a matter of degree does not mean that the distinction is eradicated. Degrees can be large and consequential. Degrees matter. For example, in my own work I have tried to argue that sociologists remain largely captivated with their own conceptions of inequality, despite the proliferation of qualitative and constructionist studies of this topic (see Chapters 5 and 6). Even scholars who acknowledge the idea that "meaning is not inherent" subsequently proceed to treat inequality as an objective fact whose features can be readily observed and explained by analysts (e.g., Collins 2000; Heiner 2002; Lamont and Molnár 2002; Ore 2003). The risk of this objectivism is that we may not fully understand the diverse meanings that "unequal situations" may have for people in everyday life, as well as how those meanings are created (Harris 2006a, 2006b). In response to my critique, however, a more objectivist scholar might reasonably argue that a rigorously interpretive sociology entail risks of its own, such as missing the opportunity to correct the public's misunderstandings about the real extent and causes of inequality and other problems.

Adopting any orientation involves risks and benefits. All theoretical perspectives have strengths and weaknesses. So let many flowers bloom—but let's not treat them as if they were all from the same plant. I suggest that the distinction between objective and interpretive construc-

tionism provides one way to summarize and clarify the different kinds of constructionist work that have proliferated in sociology (and related social sciences) in the past few decades. Clearly, this distinction is only a starting point. OSC and ISC are themselves very broad labels; more could be done to specify all of the subtypes of, as well as all the ambiguous overlaps between, these two approaches.

My third and final point is, thus, an endorsement of vigilance. Readers who are interested in understanding and using constructionist ideas may benefit from increased alertness regarding the particular form of constructionism that is in play in any given publication or passage therein. Vigilance is required because even when two scholars invoke the same theoretical source, excerpt, and concept—such as Berger and Luckmann (1966, p. 89) on reification—there is still ample room for ambiguity and divergent agendas. These agendas shape what we know and what we try to learn.

Perhaps it is fitting that the basic premises of constructionism—that meaning is not inherent, that it depends on people’s purposes and perspectives—apply reflexively to the concept of social constructionism itself. If you think about it, how could it be any other way?

## **Outline of the Book**

A theorist’s selection of substantive examples is often a somewhat arbitrary act. In this book, I have attempted to demonstrate the utility of the OSC/ISC distinction by, admittedly, choosing five topics that fit my own research interests and background. However, by focusing on mind, emotions, family diversity, marital equality, and social inequality in Chapters 2–5, I have also attempted to address a range of diverse and attention-grabbing topics. These chapters begin with (seemingly) “micro” or small-scale concerns and move toward “macro” or larger-scale concerns, and they progress from (apparently) apolitical issues toward topics that are glaringly political and contentious. I say “seemingly” and “apparently” because, as most sociologists should know, adjectives such as micro/macro and political/apolitical are not straightforward. (Indeed, they are as slippery to grasp and apply as the objective/interpretive distinction). Upon closer inspection, readers will be able to see that the chapters on mind and emotions do have implications for contentious debates over large-scale social problems and that studies of “small-scale” social interactions have import for an in-depth understanding of family diversity and social inequalities.

Although these chapters delve into theoretical, methodological, and substantive details that are somewhat particular to their respective topics, there are many recurring arguments that link them. Each chapter attempts to demonstrate the utility of viewing constructionist literature through the objective/interpretive prism. Each chapter argues that objective and interpretive constructionist scholars use seemingly identical concepts to produce highly divergent research findings—and that these perspectives and findings lead to differing implications for social policy and social reform. Each chapter attempts to show that interpretive constructionism is still—despite the growth and widespread adoption of the generic “constructionism” label—a somewhat neglected and underutilized perspective in comparison to objective constructionism. Last, each chapter attempts to demonstrate that the distinction between objective and interpretive constructionism is more a continuum than a dichotomy, and that authors and readers could benefit from a greater awareness of the big difference that can result even from a number of small differences that are merely matters of degree. I hope readers find these arguments convincing. An expanded description of each chapter follows.

### *Chapter 2: Constructing Minds*

A fundamental starting point for many sociological constructionists is the idea that the human “mind” is a social creation rather than a biological inevitability. Classic studies of children raised in relative isolation illustrate the contingent nature of our minds: unless thoroughly socialized by others, human beings have very limited ability to think and communicate. Mind is further shaped in that others teach us *how* to think. We derive our perspectives and values from the groups we associate with, both in childhood and adulthood. Many interactionist and phenomenological concepts (such as cultural beliefs and values, interpretive frames, mind-sets, role taking, social lenses and prisms, stocks of knowledge, and worldviews) all cohere around the argument that the contents and functioning of our minds—as objective (real) aspects of our being—are socially constructed.

But there is another sense in which mind is created in social interaction. Interpretive constructionists highlight how the *idea* of mind is used in everyday life. People attribute “mind” to their pets, computers, cars, and other nonhuman entities. They also debate the kinds of mind that they and others possess: bright, dim, honest, deviant, criminal, generous, selfish, insane, deliberative, confused, blank, and so on. Individuals frequently attribute specific thoughts to themselves and others as they

tell stories about past and future events. All of these actions involve giving meaning to minds. Research in this tradition of constructionism demonstrates how the existence and nature of our minds are interpretively created as well as objectively created.

### *Chapter 3: Managing Emotions*

This chapter builds on the previous one by examining a related micro-sociological issue: human feelings. In contrast to assumptions about the natural or biological basis of emotions, sociologists have argued that emotions are socially constructed. A major strand of research in this tradition focuses on the active effort individuals put into managing their feelings and the feelings of others. Emotion management can be given an objective or interpretive spin, however. Most authors follow Arlie Russell Hochschild (1983) and write about “emotion work” in relatively objectivist terms: the subject of analysis is how people manipulate appearances and experiences of actual bodily states.

A smaller group of scholars approaches emotion management more interpretively. For them, the goal is to understand how ideas or assertions about emotions are created. Emotional categories (from love to road rage) are developed and innovatively applied to ambiguous circumstances in everyday life. When two friends debate whether someone is “pissed off” or “only a little irritated” or “not bothered at all,” they are creating emotions by defining them into (or out of) being. Research in this vein demonstrates how “real or disguised feeling states” are not just worked up or managed in the traditional sense of objective constructionism; they are interpretively constructed as well.

### *Chapter 4: Family Diversity*

Chapter 4 begins to move the book’s subject matter toward what would conventionally be seen as more “macro” and controversial topics, by focusing less on the “inner” workings of individuals’ thoughts and feelings and more on “external” relationships and inequalities. Most social scientists who study the family today are fully aware that there are a plethora of family forms in the United States and other countries. Rather, the foil for many scholars is the commonsense belief in and reverence for what has been called “The Standard North American Family” or SNAF (Smith 1993): a heterosexual husband, wife, and their biological children living under one roof, preferably with the husband being the sole or primary breadwinner. Many books and articles

are devoted to describing, explaining, and often extolling family diversity that has developed over time and across different cultures, such as single parent families, adoptive families, foster families, stepfamilies, polygamous families, and many others. To counter SNAF assumptions, these works seek to familiarize readers with these diverse ways of practicing family, to engender sympathy and respect for different kinds of families, and to foster recognition of the social factors that construct family life.

Not all constructionist scholars study family diversity in the same fashion. There is a second major alternative way of approaching family diversity that is somewhat less recognized in the literature. I call this approach “interpretive family diversity.” Here the focus is on how the same set of interpersonal relationships can be variously interpreted. People acquire different conceptual frameworks that they creatively use to define whether a family relationship exists, what kind of family it is, and what causes and consequences are associated with that family. The existence and nature of family is something that is discussed and debated, and thereby “talked into being,” in everyday life. These divergent assumptions can lead interpretive scholars to produce analyses that diverge dramatically from traditional objectivist research, even though they use seemingly identical concepts to address similar explanatory concerns.

### *Chapter 5: Creating Equal Marriages*

Family diversity has been a serious concern of researchers and social justice advocates for some time, but so too has the issue of fairness in marriage. In the past fifty years, much has been written on marital equality, but almost exclusively from objective viewpoints. Even qualitative researchers have given constructionist verbiage an objectivist spin: marital equality is something that is “built” or “created” as a real condition. The vast majority of scholars have sought to understand the contexts and actions that lead to the “production” of factually equal or unequal relationships.

Recent interpretive research, in contrast, examines how marital equality is created *as a meaning* rather than an actual condition. In this view, “the social construction of marital equality” consists of the interpretive practices by which people define relationships as equal or unequal. Whereas objectivist researchers (1) define marital equality, (2) measure the extent to which couples have achieved equality, and (3) explain the causes and consequences of equality and inequality, interpre-

tive researchers study how married people (and their companions, counselors, lawyers, etc.) accomplish those three tasks. On the one hand, interpretive constructionism can help researchers more carefully investigate (rather than assume) the diverse meanings that spouses may live by. On the other hand, an interpretive approach leads to a more relativistic and hesitant moral stance; it complicates advocacy and the pursuit of social reforms that might promote “real” gender equality at home.

### *Chapter 6: Producing Social Inequality*

The topic of marital equality can prove to be a helpful launching point for an even more controversial discussion of inequality in general. The sociological literature is filled with descriptions and analyses of social inequality. Sociologists are concerned with economic stratification, health disparities, racial and sexual discrimination, educational disadvantages, and a plethora of related issues. However, this chapter shows that social inequalities can be approached as objective situations or as interpretations. Most sociologists study the social creation of inequality by attempting to find facts: What is the nature and extent of the inequality? What “produces” or causes it? What are its negative consequences? What policies or practices might ameliorate inequality?

I argue that more scholars should study the interpretive construction of inequality by focusing on the diverse claims people make about the nature, extent, causes, and effects of putative inequalities. I summarize and explain the similarities and differences between four seemingly constructionist publications that fall in different places along the objective-interpretive continuum. In so doing, I hope to show that there is still much room for an interpretive agenda to be pursued. Rigorously interpretive scholars do not need to shy away from this macro, politically charged topic.

### *Chapter 7: Conclusion*

The final chapter summarizes my argument and addresses nine questions I expect readers may have, based on reactions I have received from those who have read (or listened to me present) earlier versions.

I maintain that social constructionism is of crucial importance in sociology and related social sciences, despite the ambiguities of this perspective. Readers would benefit by being more aware of the internal contradictions of constructionism, and researchers could identify untapped



avenues of inquiry by noticing whether current constructionist research on a topic is of the objective or interpretive variety.

## Notes

1. Among other sources, see Schutz (1970) and Berger and Luckmann (1966) on phenomenological sociology; Garfinkel (1967) and Heritage (1984) on ethnomethodology; and Blumer (1969) and Mead (1934) on symbolic interactionism and pragmatism. Textbooks and readers that discuss these perspectives include those by Cahill (2004); Coulon (1995); Hewitt (1997); Lindesmith, Strauss, and Denzin (1999); Musolf (2003); O'Brien (2006); Prus (1996); Reynolds (1993); Sandstrom, Martin, and Fine (2003); and others.

2. For examples, see Fontana (2002), Manning (2001), Riessman (2002), and Zerubavel (1997).

3. I use OSC and ISC as nouns (as in *constructionism*) and as adjectives (as in *constructionist*), depending on the context.

4. For other examples, see Ulmer and Spencer's (1999) review of interactionist research on *criminal career contingencies* and compare it with Holstein and Gubrium's (2000, pp. 162–163) discussion of *interpretive contingencies*. Whereas the research on criminal career contingencies involves carefully studying the various factors that shape real phases and stages of life, research on interpretive contingencies involves carefully studying the various factors that shape how the life course (including any putative phases, stages, or causes) is given meaning.

5. O'Brien alludes to this deeper form of contingency in other places in her book. For example, her own definition of constructionism (O'Brien 2006, p. 55) is more interpretive than objective, despite her later uses of the perspective.

6. In ISC, causality or "why" questions enter in limited fashion and tend to revolve around the issue of *why interpretations happen the way they do*, with the goal of discerning the factors that shape the meaning-making process (see Gubrium and Holstein 1997, chap. 9).

7. In Chapter 6 I explain this assertion in greater detail. Schwalbe and colleagues (2000) assume that inequality exists objectively and that it is the scholar's job to define inequality, decide what the most important kinds are, find examples, and explain the causal factors that "produce" it. A more rigorously interpretive approach would bracket the existence of inequality and study how people interpretively produce inequality meanings through their own definitions, examples, and explanations.

8. Similarly, Berard (2006, p. 12) treats reification as assuming that inequality (or any entity) exists "prior to and independent of social understandings and judgments."

9. Some of this analysis does move further down the continuum toward ISC, however. Fishman (1978) and Devault (1991), respectively, assert that "doing" conversations and "doing" family are ways of "doing gender." By coordinating an in-depth conversation or orchestrating a family meal, women can be seen as assembling signs of gender propriety and thereby performing what is

taken to be “natural.” Though this interesting analysis seems (to me) fairly inferential and overlaid onto the objective analysis, it does highlight the creation of meaning. It arguably occupies an ambiguous middle ground along the OSC-ISC continuum.

10. It is always possible to find realist assumptions in a constructionist’s research—not the least of which is the assumption that it is possible to study and accurately describe the interpretive work that people do. Moreover, interpretive scholars are always finding something else in need of bracketing that has been overlooked by their fellow constructionists. For example, constructionist staples such as “mind” and “perspectives” have been examined as interpretive accomplishment—as I show in the next chapter.