

## CHAPTER 1

# The Constructionist Mosaic

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The term *constructionism* has reverberated across the social sciences since the 1960s. From the start, constructionist research has highlighted both the dynamic contours of social reality and the processes by which social reality is put together and assigned meaning. The leading idea always has been that the world we live in and our place in it are not simply and evidently “there” for participants. Rather, participants actively construct the world of everyday life and its constituent elements. Grounded on this principle, constructionism has become an intellectual movement whose empirical insights are widely recognized.

As promising and vibrant as the movement might be, it is also under fire on several fronts. Heated debates have erupted on nearly every disciplinary terrain. Con-

structionism has been called radical and conservative; liberating, managerial, and oppressive; relativist, revisionist, and neo-objectivist; cancerous, pernicious, and pandemic; protean, faddish, trendy, and dull. It has been a major combatant in the “science wars” and “culture wars” of the 1990s and 2000s. (See Hacking, 1999; Holstein & Miller, 1993; Lynch, 2001. Also see Best, Chapter 3; Lynch, Chapter 37; and Restivo & Croissant, Chapter 11, this volume.) Ian Hacking’s widely noted collection of philosophical essays, *The Social Construction of What?* (1999) is an exception in this regard. It offers a dispassionate, even amiable critique of both constructionism and the controversy surrounding it. Although Hacking is decidedly ambivalent about constructionism’s contributions, his own empirical work

and his philosophical ruminations bring considerable nuance to the discussion of what constructionism has to offer.

This *Handbook* does not aspire to resolve these debates. Instead, it works from the presumption that constructionism as embodied in the social sciences offers a useful empirical perspective that has proven remarkably fruitful over the past four decades. The volume offers a forum for an array of constructionist adherents to present and respond to the issues. The aim of the *Handbook* is to explore the conceptual and empirical developments that have produced a broad and deep corpus of constructionist research across the social sciences. If the volume speaks to the debates at all, it is by way of ample and compelling demonstrations of the ideas, methods, and findings that constitute the constructionist enterprise.

### **The Constructionist Project**

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One of the earliest and most influential statements of constructionist sentiments was Peter Berger's and Thomas Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966). The book took the social sciences by storm, encouraging empirical attention to the ordinary, taken-for-granted reality-constructing processes of everyday life. It rendered problematic the most common understanding, the "facts" of experience that heretofore were treated as matters to be straightforwardly discovered, recorded, and analyzed. Berger and Luckmann (1966) accepted Emile Durkheim (1961, 1964) at his word in presenting a framework for viewing how social facts become matters in categories of their own, *sui generis*, separate from the actions of those who seek to know them. The constructionist perspective implicated everyone, from those to whose lives the ostensible facts referred, to those who studied them through scientific investigation.

Forty years later, the term *constructionism* has become a prominent label, prefacing or

attached to myriad accounts of the organization of experience. From the social construction of mind (Coulter, 1979) and self (Wiley, 1994) to the social construction of social problems (Spector & Kitsuse, 1977), wife abuse (Loseke, 1992), and pregnancy (Gardner, 1994), constructionism has flourished as a frame of understanding and a vocabulary for conducting empirical research. It has arrived with considerable fanfare on many fronts, a source of inspiration to some postmodernist projects and, curiously enough, also enthusiastically applied by some who adopt critical perspectives. Constructionism now belongs to everyone and to no one—a highly variegated mosaic of itself. Indeed, the rush to jump on the constructionist bandwagon prompted Hacking (1999) to caution his audience about its wholesale acceptance across the disciplines. His book prods us to consider the scope of the "realities" that are constructed, encouraging us to take stock of what constructionism has become and can or cannot be in its analytic and empirical ambitions.

### **Rationale for the Volume**

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We have assembled this *Handbook of Constructionist Research* because the time is right to critically but appreciatively take stock of where constructionist research has been, what it has become, and where it is likely to go in the future. Despite the controversies, constructionist research is increasingly popular across the disciplines, and there are no signs that it will lose momentum. Indeed, Hacking's book, if cautionary, is also generous in its recognition of constructionist achievements and possible growth areas. Yet, beyond Hacking's commentary, there has been no comprehensive review of constructionist research across the social and behavioral sciences and associated disciplines. Research along constructionist lines continues apace without considered attention to the diversity within the enterprise and without a judicious examination of the

analytic implications and issues of the constructionist project.

In editing the *Handbook of Constructionist Research*, our aim is to be both general and specific in addressing theoretical, methodological, and technical issues in the context of empirical research. The volume is not simply philosophical and abstract, dealing with the various assumptions of the research enterprise (see, e.g., Holstein & Miller, 1993). Instead, the *Handbook* turns to insiders—constructionist researchers themselves—for reflections on and assessments and critiques of what has been done and what can be accomplished within this framework. Constructionist researchers from across the disciplines—including psychology, anthropology, sociology, political science, education, management, communications, and related fields—address the enterprise from the bottom up. From the history of constructionist thinking to alternative analytic frameworks, strategies for empirical work, and techniques of constructionist data collection, the chapters provide a comprehensive overview of the foundations and the practice of constructionist research. The *Handbook* addresses the particular issues and concerns that distinctly arise in and from constructionist work, from the contours of various forms of constructionist understanding to diverse research programs to distinctive forms of empirical outcomes.

### **Theme of the *Handbook***

Just as constructionism belongs to no one and to everyone, the term *constructionism* has come to virtually mean both everything and nothing at the same time. Michael Lynch (2001) calls constructionism “remarkably protean,” too diverse and diffuse to define, let alone assess. This volume seeks to address, if not counter, this accusation by providing a forum highlighting the variety as well as the common elements of constructionist empirical work. In doing so, it presents explanations and rationales for how

and why research is distinctively constructionist. The theme of the *Handbook* is that constructionism is not spun out of whole cloth but rather is a rubric for a mosaic of research efforts with diverse—but shared—theoretical, methodological, and empirical groundings and significance. As readers will note, despite the remarkably varied involvement of disciplines and research topics, constructionist social science has more or less common motivations and aspirations.

Popular and comprehensive analytic rubrics are often thoughtlessly adopted and carelessly applied. Recently, we have witnessed the tendency for researchers and writers to claim glibly to be working from a constructionist stance (see Berbrier, Chapter 29, this volume). Too often, they display in their work either a profound ignorance of or a disregard for the epistemological, ontological, methodological, and practical foundations of constructionism that distinguish it from other approaches. Doing constructionist research is not a synonym for qualitative inquiry. Nor is constructionism fully congruent with symbolic interactionism, social phenomenology, or ethnomethodology, even though they share an abiding interest in social interaction. Instead it is a distinctive way of seeing and questioning the social world—a vocabulary, an idiom, a language of interpretation (see Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). One’s analytic vocabulary virtually specifies the parameters and contours of the empirical horizons explored by the research approach. An analytic stance and vocabulary cannot be casually taken on board.

There are distinctive empirical implications, methodological concerns, and technical challenges that flow directly from constructionism’s analytic vocabulary. Constructionist research typically deals with practical workings of *what* is constructed and *how* the construction process unfolds. The constructionist vocabulary does not lend itself easily to dealing with the *why* questions that predominate in more positivistically oriented inquiry, even though some *Handbook* contributors do not view this as an

impediment. The *Handbook* focuses on the relation between the foundations of constructionism and how the perspective is put into practice in theoretically and conceptually viable, empirically productive ways.

Constructionism's analytic vocabulary points researchers in distinctive directions, virtually demanding answers to particular questions. At the same time, other questions would seem less appropriate. For example, constructionists offer major contributions by describing the complex contours of meaning associated with social forms that are interactionally and/or discursively produced, dealing with questions such as, what are mental illness and child abuse as social constructions? They can outline the historical and contextual development of social forms, such as how homelessness emerged as a recognizable phenomenon in the 1970s. They specify the processes and practices whereby social forms are brought into meaningful existence, such as how family troubles or emotional disturbance are "talked into being" in the course of everyday life.

For some, constructionism is less viable, theoretically and empirically, when researchers attempt to establish the "reality" of one social construction over another. Constructionism is narrowly partisan or analytically compromised when it becomes a "debunking" enterprise that invidiously compares or challenges the everyday life constructions by which people live (see Best, Chapter 3, this volume). In general, the perspective is more empirically robust when it is implemented as a broad framework or analytics for appreciating, not critiquing, everyday reality-constructing practices in general.

### **The Variety of Constructionisms**

The considerable variety in constructionist research can be viewed as distributed along two fronts. One is the kind of question the researcher asks. Most constructionist investigations address the question of *how* social reality is assembled. But the *what* questions

regarding the working—often hidden—elements and organization of constructed realities are similarly important. Researchers who stress the *hows* of experience and the social world target the everyday methods, rules, and strategies by which reality is put together, setting aside concern with substantive matters while they pursue this interest. Others focus more on making visible important features of otherwise unknown experiences or social worlds, in which case the *hows* of the matter take a back seat to the goal of describing the unrecognized realities of everyday life. Still other constructionists take both *how* and *what* interests on board, working back and forth between them.

The leading concerns of the *how* and the *what* approaches parallel the differences between the so-called strong and weak programs in the sociology of science (see Restivo & Croissant, Chapter 11, this volume), as well as between so-called strict and contextual constructionisms in the study of social problems (see Best, Chapter 3, and Ibarra, Chapter 18, this volume). Perhaps the most extreme variants adopt postmodern approaches to the *hows*, concentrating on representational practices to the extent that they abandon most conventionally empirical concerns and direct their attention to researchers' textual practices in the construction of reality (see Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Holstein & Gubrium, Chapter 19, this volume).

On another front, constructionist research also may be viewed as varying in terms of the "scope," "level," or "empirical register" of analysis. Like social researchers in general, constructionists carry with them favored orientations to the scale of reality. Some habitually orient to the face-to-face or microinteractional sites of the construction process (see, e.g., Marvasti, Chapter 16; Potter & Hepburn, Chapter 14; and Sparkes & Smith, Chapter 15, this volume). They bring with them a heritage of interest in talk, situated interaction, local culture, and the interaction order. This is the bailiwick, for example, of symbolic interactionists and ethnomethodologists, whose leading con-

cern with social accomplishment has always resonated with constructionist sensibilities.

The empirical interest of other constructionists veers in a more interactionally distant direction, toward the macroscopic contexts of the construction process. This is the domain of those concerned with collective representations and constructed social forms writ large, as in the tradition of constructionism associated with Malcolm Spector's and John Kitsuse's programmatic book *Constructing Social Problems* (1977). Constructionists of this ilk commonly focus on the media-embedded discourses and discursive structures of social construction projects. For example, they deal with how social movements promote particular constructions of social reality through print and electronic media (see Lowney, Chapter 17, this volume). Foucauldian studies also reside at this level (see L. Miller, Chapter 13, this volume). This mode of research sets the analytic stage in terms of the historical/genealogical discourses that provide the institutional frameworks mediating subjectivity and everyday life. These researchers tend to work comparatively, tracing institutional and state formations as discourse relates to differences.

The theme of diversity—the constructionist mosaic—echoes throughout the *Handbook*. If it were not so awkward, it would be compelling for the volume's title to refer to the variety of *constructionisms* (plural) and their diverse contributions to the corpus of constructionist research. Accordingly, the volume does not center so much on what constructionism *is* as on what it *can be*. The various chapters present this diversity in rich detail. For example, chapters describe various approaches to constructive processes in terms of discourse analysis, interactional analysis, interview analysis, and the analysis of diverse texts, documents, and other informational media. Other chapters highlight a wide variety of disciplinary concerns. Perhaps constructionism in the social sciences is too broad and diverse to simply define. But this diversity, we would argue, is part of constructionism's strength and appeal.

## The Design of the Volume

If there are discernible dimensions to constructionist research—ranging across the *hows* and *whats* of reality and representation and spanning conventionally macroscopic and microscopic levels of analysis—there also are particular concerns linked to substantive, theoretical, and procedural matters and their ongoing challenges. The volume is organized in relation to these issues.

The two chapters of Part I set the stage for the range of topics. As a start, it is important to note that, whether research deals with the physical, social, literary, artistic, or spiritual, it has philosophical bearings. Long before a stream of thinking and empirical work took the label of constructionism in the social sciences, constructionist inclinations were emanating from the basic philosophical questions commonly asked about life and the social world. What is the nature of our selves and our surroundings? How do these matters operate in time and space? What can be known about them? How should this be represented and communicated? Each of these philosophical questions has constructionist bearings.

The social sciences are hardly more than a hundred years old; philosophical discussions have gone on for centuries. Chapter 2, by Darin Weinberg, takes a trip through the philosophical literature that has most directly influenced the social sciences. Reading about the “invention of the mind” in the 17th century, a space viewed as an inner preserve categorically separate from its surroundings, we are apprised of a debate that launches a long and illustrious philosophical commentary on the relation between ordinary reality within and the world outside. An inclination to eschew a straightforward connection between interior and exterior realms moved us toward constructionist sensibilities long before social researchers took up the issues in their own right. We soon learn that the present and continuing themes and challenges of constructionist research have a preliminary and intensely controversial philosophical background.

Chapter 3, by Joel Best, deals less with philosophical matters than with the historical context of social constructionism as a research agenda. It introduces the reader to key concerns that launched a distinct stream of empirical work related to social and cultural forms. The chapter takes Berger and Luckmann's (1966) *The Social Construction of Reality* as the pioneering constructionist text in the social sciences. The chapter traces constructionist themes primarily through sociology, in which the deconstruction of deviance and social problems provided the initial inspiration. This line of inquiry presented trenchant conceptual and explanatory challenges to what previously were figured to be plainly obvious social issues such as crime, poverty, sexual deviance, alcoholism, and substance abuse.

From the newly emergent constructionist perspective, even the vocabulary of "real" social problems was challenged. The constructionist argument was that understandings of "problems" such as sexual nonconformity or domestic abuse were as much matters of rhetoric, power, and influence as they were concrete social conditions. Although few constructionists argued that social problems were just rhetoric, constructionists nonetheless were challenged for making the claim and taken to task for inconsistencies in their stance regarding the empirical realities. This led to a lengthy debate centered on ontological and rhetorical, as well as empirical, dimensions of constructionist inquiry.

Part II turns to the disciplinary contexts of constructionist research. As the chapters show, Berger and Luckmann's work resonates far and wide, if not to every corner of the social sciences. Although each discipline had early realist and positivistic commitments, each has been challenged by constructionist themes, some sooner than others. For example, anthropologists James D. Faubion and George E. Marcus argue in Chapter 4 that the representational and comparative cultural challenges of their discipline sparked constructionist ruminations almost from the start. Indeed, they ask how

the dramatic categorical differences in human nature across the globe could not be viewed as socially constructed to begin with.

As each chapter in Part II surveys distinctive disciplinary developments, constructionism's cross-cutting themes become apparent. Readers will note that often constructionist sensibilities materialize in similar ways in the various disciplines, despite their traditional boundaries. Clearly, the diverse constructionisms are of the same family, even if they are not identical siblings. At the same time, however, it is surprising the extent to which the various disciplines have developed lines of constructionist inquiry without reference to one another. It appears that the constructionist wheel has been reinvented on more than one occasion. This volume provides the opportunity for the various disciplines to benefit from advances in allied fields. The constructionist sociology of social problems, for instance, should undoubtedly consult constructionist studies of public policy, and vice versa.

The concern with disciplinary applications in Part II also raises an implied question about the varied use of the terms *constructionist* versus *constructivist*. There has been a tendency to apply the former term as a more socially centered usage, as in anthropology, sociology, and some branches of psychology. Constructivism, however, has considerable currency in science, mathematics, and technology studies, as well as in lines of inquiry concerned with inner psychological space (e.g., constructivist psychotherapy). Rather than inviting a deconstruction of the competing terms and their implied realities or provoking a debate over the utility of the distinction, we simply have asked the contributors to adopt the generic term *constructionist* whenever possible. They have taken up the distinction only in those instances in which it seems to bear importantly on empirical matters.

Part III turns to the scope of constructionist inquiry, dealing with the concerns of the various levels of analysis we broached earlier. The context here is less disciplinary

than it is related to matters of empirical register and emphasis. For more macroscopic applications, the concerns are applied to historical and broadly discursive differences. Leslie Miller's chapter (Chapter 13) on Foucauldian constructionism, for example, is "macroscopic" in its discussion of Michel Foucault's historical genealogies of regimes/regimens of knowledge. The word "macroscopic" necessarily is in quotation marks because Foucault's project would readily deconstruct the macro-micro distinction itself. Foucauldian discourses implicate both the macroscopic and microscopic. The other end of the conventional scope of constructionist inquiry takes us to the narrative and interactional work that produces and assembles realities in everyday life. Here, the accent is on "work," such as the reality work whose claims and related communicative practices construct a shared sense of, and facts about, entities such as homelessness and the life course.

Part IV deals with procedural matters. The leading question here is what difference constructionist impulses make in how social researchers do their work—in particular, how they gather and analyze empirical material. Kathy Charmaz (Chapter 20), for example, challenges grounded theorists to think in constructionist terms, suggesting that they "ground" systematic participant observation in representational practices as much as in real-life circumstances. The constructionist challenge is to approach social worlds as realities assembled and sustained, not just as evidently available for documentation and analysis. Although this part of the *Handbook* is divided into chapters dealing with distinct methodological approaches, from ethnographic fieldwork to interviewing to the analysis of historical and personal documents, a comparison clearly shows that these are not straightforwardly different strategies and techniques. The division again bears on methods *in practice* as much as on conventional distinctions. Fieldworkers interview, interviewers observe, discourse analysts conduct fieldwork, and ar-

chival material is related to oral history and field observation. The list goes on, and the permutations are virtually endless. Still, the common concerns of constructionist inquiry provide a committed orientation to the field, the data, and its analysis.

The title of Part V borrows from Hacking's book by the same title. Hacking raises the question of the extent to which various kinds of reality are constructed. For example, in what sense are natural or physical realities (e.g., quarks) socially constructed as opposed to more social phenomena, such as child abuse? Although the chapters in this part do not address this issue philosophically, they do provide useful surveys of how the construction of reality has been construed at some of the leading edges of social research. From the construction of the body, emotions, and gender to the construction of race, therapy, and the nation, it is evident that, although the concerns are similar, the applications raise diverse questions and shed multifaceted light on the substantive and related mechanics of the construction process.

The final contributions, in Part VI, bring us face-to-face with the continuing challenges of, and to, constructionism. If constructionism raises serious issues regarding the nature of reality, how then can reality be politically contested and changed? Can constructionism be critical? This is a question that takes up the issue of preferred realities. Other concerns emanate from feminist, postcolonial, and cultural studies agendas, all of which, at the same time, have integral constructionist impulses. If they are critical, they also are inspired by one of constructionism's leading themes, namely, that realities that are constructed can be deconstructed and assembled otherwise. This places constructionism squarely in a political environment, something which, interestingly enough, some constructionists seek to deconstruct. As curiously juxtaposed as they are, these concerns and the challenges are integral to the constructionist project, providing both inspiration for and barriers to its ongoing development and application.

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