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SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION: REVOLUTION IN THE MAKING

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Recently I had a diagnostic test in which needles were stuck into my arm, and the doctor delivered a series of electrical shocks. The test is known to be a bit painful and I was not looking forward to it. However, as the doctor began to insert the needles into my skin, I decided to try an experiment. Each time I was jolted by a shock I would respond not with an anguished grunt, but with laughter. The procedure began, along with my experiment in hilarity. Possibly the doctor thought that it was really my sanity that was in question. But for me the little experiment was paying off. Sure, there were sensations I would call painful, but somehow the laughter had a transformative power. I wasn't in agony; in fact, I found myself light-hearted, and smiling as I left the examination room.

But why did I attempt this little experiment? It is largely because I have been deeply involved in the drama – both intellectual and practical – that will unfold in

the pages that follow. Consider the longstanding tradition that teaches us that we must know the world for what it is. We must study the world carefully and objectively; with such knowledge we can predict and control what takes place. But what is this objective world? Surely, we would count pain as something worthy of study. But if my laughter can change my experience of pain, then clearly, pain does not exist "out there", independent of me. Pain depends, at least in part, on how one approaches it. In effect, pain is not pain is not pain. And if this is the case with pain, what else should we include? Do racial differences exist "out there", independent of how we approach the world, or differences in intelligence or gender? And if one's approach is important in these cases, then what are the limits? Are the mountains the same for a young child, an athlete and an old man? Is a tree the same object for a botanist, a forester, and a landscaper? What indeed is "the objective world?"

Herein lies the opening chapter of this drama called *social construction*: what we take to be the world importantly depends on how we approach it, and how we approach to it depends on the social relationships of which we are a part. When fully understood, you will find that constructionist ideas will challenge long honoured words like "truth", "objectivity", "reason", and "knowledge". Your understanding of yourself – your thoughts, emotions, and desires – will also be transformed. Your relations with others will come to have an entirely new meaning. You will see world conflict in a different light. Constructionist ideas and practices are now explored in all corners of the world. You may travel from Buenos Aires to Helsinki, from London to Hong Kong, from New Delhi to Moscow and find lively discussions of these issues. As many believe, these ideas may be vital to the world's future. To be sure, there is controversy; with change there is inevitably resistance. You may also find yourself resisting. All the better. This should sharpen the edge of your reading.

You should also realize that the ideas generally called social constructionist, do not belong to any one individual. There is no single book or school of philosophy that defines social construction. Rather, social constructionist ideas emerge from a process of dialogue, a dialogue that is ongoing, and to which anyone – even you as reader – may contribute. As a result, however, there is no one, authoritative account that represents all the participants. There are many different views, and some tensions among them. However, in this Chapter I will first outline a number of major proposals as shared by many. To appreciate these proposals in greater depth, I will then fill out some of the historical background. How did people – scholars or otherwise – come into this orientation? This discussion will also give you some insight into why these ideas are so revolutionary and so controversial. Later chapters will be devoted to implications and applications.

Together We Construct Our Worlds

If I ask about the world, you can offer to tell me how it is under one or more frames of reference; but if I insist that you tell me how it is apart from all frames, what can you say?

Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*

The pivotal idea in social construction is simple and straightforward. However, as you unpack the implications and consequences, this simplicity rapidly dissolves. 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 challenging 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 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 I proposed that there are no trees, buildings, women, men, and so on until you and I agree that there are? "Absurd", you may say, "Just look around you; the trees 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 the buds on the trees turn to leaves as Spring approaches. We see the leaves fall from the trees when Autumn comes. We read the advertisement on the passing bus, and pay attention when the policeman tells us to stop. In Julie's world there are no men and women, no budding trees, no advertisements, and no police. What reaches our eyeballs may not be different from Julie's, but what this world *means to us* is different. In this sense, we approach the world in a different way. This difference is rooted in our social relationships. It is within these relationships that we construct the world in this way or that. In relationships the world comes to be what it is for us. And, as Julie's relationships with her family and friends are extended, she will come to construct the world in much the same way we do.

Different You's from Different Views

To the:	You are:
Biologist	"a mammal"
Hairdresser	"needing a cut"
Teacher	"college material"
Gay man	"possibly straight"
Christian	"a sinner"
Parent	"surprisingly successful"
Artist	"an excellent model"
Psychologist	"slightly neurotic"
Physicist	"an atomic composition"

(Continued)

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(Continued)

Banker	"a future customer"
Doctor	"a hypochondriac"
Hindu	"in an imperfect state of Atman"
Lover	"a wonderful person"
Ifalukian	"filled with liget"

Could you ever be described in terms that were not shared by others? And if there is something there prior to description, how would we identify it? Whose terms would we use to describe it?

The basic idea of social construction may seem simple enough. But consider the consequences: If everything we consider real is socially constructed, then *nothing* is real unless people agree that it is. You may now be skeptical. Does this mean that death is not real, or the body, or the sun, or this chair on which I am seated … and the list goes on. It is important to 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 reality – that death is real, or the body, the sun, and the chair on which they are sitting – they are speaking from a particular standpoint. To be sure, something happens, but in describing it you will inevitably rely on some tradition of sense making.

To illustrate, if someone says, "My grandfather is dead", he or she is usually speaking from a biological standpoint. The event is defined as the termination of certain bodily functioning. 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". Each of these descriptions is legitimate in the traditions in which they were created. But, for little Julie, the event might indeed be unremarkable. In her world "grandfather's death" doesn't exist as an event. For the constructionist, it is not that, "There is nothing", but "*nothing for us*". In other words, it is from our relationships with others that the world becomes filled with what we take to be "death", "the sun", "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. In one conversation, we may find much that is wrong with the world. There are the daily pressures, the lack of money, the lack of opportunity, and so on. In other conversations there are excitements, enthusiasms, and hopes. The realities we live in are outcomes of the conversations in which we are engaged. As long as we make the familiar distinctions, for example, between men and women, day and night, good and bad, life remains relatively predictable. Yet, all that we take for granted can also be challenged. For example, "problems" don't exist in the world as independent facts; rather we construct worlds of good and bad, and define anything standing in the way of achieving what we value as "a problem". If the conversation could be changed, all that we construct as "problems" could be reconstructed as "opportunities". As we speak together, we can also bring new worlds into being. We could construct a world in which

there are three genders, the "mentally ill" are "spiritual healers", or where "the power" in all organizations lies not within individual leaders but in the lowly worker.

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 must 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 alternatives, and play at the edges of common sense, we cross the threshold into new worlds of meaning. The future is ours – together – to create.

With this fundamental vision at hand, we can now explore more deeply some of the central assumptions at play here. These five assumptions form the backbone for the remainder of the book.

1. The way in which we understand the world is not required by "what there is".

> Man has created death.
>
> William Butler Yeats, *Death*

You might readily agree there is nothing about your particular body that required your receiving the name you live by. If your name is James, you could have been named Jordan, Julia or Jerome. In effect, you owe your name to others. It is a matter of social convention. But now expand the implications: Given whatever exists, we may say that there is no arrangement of syllables, words or phrases that must be used to describe or explain it. For any state of affairs a potentially unlimited number of descriptions and explanations should be possible. If this is so, then it also follows that everything we have learned about our world and ourselves – that gravity holds us to the earth, people and birds both fly, cancer kills, or that the earth revolves around the sun – could be otherwise. There is nothing about "what there is" that demands these particular accounts; we could use our language to construct alternative worlds in which there is no gravity or cancer, or in which persons and birds are equivalent, and the sun revolves around the world. For many people this supposition is deeply threatening. Not only does it suggest that there is no truth – words that truly map the world. Further, it suggests there is nothing we can hold onto, nothing solid on which we can rest our beliefs, nothing secure. Isn't this nihilistic?

Perhaps this state of insecurity is not as bad as it might appear. In daily life, many of our categories lead to untold suffering. Consider the distress and death that have resulted from such phrases as:

"This is mine".
"He is to blame".
"They are evil".
"This is a superior race".

"This group is more intelligent than that".
"The fertilized egg is a human being".
"There is only one God".

From the constructionist standpoint none of these phrases is demanded by "the way things are". Other ways of talking are possible, and with far more promising outcomes. This is not to abandon our various traditions of truth, but simply to see them as optional.

2. The ways in which we describe and explain the world are the outcomes of relationship.

The meaning of a word is its use in the language.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*

In Western culture we have long placed a value on personal experience. As commonly held, we each have our own private and personal experience of the world. It is through such experience that we come to know the world, to appreciate, to fear, to see its potentials, and so on. And, on this account, when we meet together, we try to communicate our experiences to each other. Coupled with the idea that we first experience the world, and then try to put the experience into words, is the view of *language as a picture*. That is, if our experience mirrors the world – thus providing us with a mental picture – then effective language should communicate to others the picture in our minds. In effect, the language could then give you a picture of the world – at least the way I experience it. If you have never been to Marrakech, I could return from a visit and my descriptions would give you a picture of what I saw. The picture theory of language is also important to our traditional understanding of truth. As often put, truth exists when our language accurately *depicts* the world. Thus, if I told you that at the centre of Marrakech you would find "The Square of the Dead", you could go there and see if this were true. As philosophers of science, have phrased it, a true statement *corresponds with* actual fact.

Now recall the proposition that the world does not drive our understanding. Whatever there is makes no demands on our descriptions. As the philosopher, Immanuel Kant, pointed out, we could stare at the world for years and never come up with concepts of number or causality. But for that matter, returning to Julie, at what point would her private observations stimulate her to talk about men as opposed to women, autumn leaves, policemen and so on? All these terms have their origins in human communities. What we take to be true about the world is not then born of the pictures in our minds, but of relationships. Understandings of the world are achieved through coordinations among persons – negotiations, agreements, comparing views, and so on. From this standpoint, relationships stand prior to all that is intelligible. Nothing exists for us as an intelligible world of objects and persons until there are relationships. This suggests that any words, phrases or sentences that are perfectly sensible to us now could, under certain conditions of relationship, be reduced to nonsense. Or conversely, in the right conversation even a muffled grunt can be endowed with deepest significance. If we do quest for certainty, something to count on, a sense of grounded reality, it can only be achieved through supportive relationships.

An open mind is the best way
to look at the world.

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imperfect

perfect

Figure 1.1

Let me be more concrete: we generally prize the natural sciences – physics, chemistry, biology, astronomy, and the like – for their advances in knowledge. They tell us about the world as it is. As also claimed, scientific knowledge begins with careful observation. In effect, high value is placed on the individual scientist who observes carefully, thinks rigorously, and tests his/her conclusions against the world. This seems reasonable on the face of it. But consider this configuration that I call "my desk". In my world the desk is solid, mahogany coloured, weighs some 180 lbs, and is odourless. Yet, the atomic physicist approaches this configuration and tells me that it is not solid after all (but primarily constituted by empty space); the psychologist informs me that it has no colour (as the experience of colour is produced by light waves reflected on the retina); the rocket scientist announces that it only appears to weigh 180 lbs (as weight depends on the surrounding gravitational field), and the biologist proposes that my sense of smell is inferior to that of my dog for whom the desk is rich in olfactory information. As carefully as I might observe, I would never reach any of these conclusions.

Consider further: each of these scientists employs a different vocabulary for understanding what I call my desk. Physicists speak of it in terms of atoms, biologists of cellulose, and engineers of static properties. None of these vocabularies is simply derived from individual observation. I could not read them from nature. Rather, the vocabularies spring from the professional disciplines; they are the forms of description and explanation particular to these traditions of practice. A physicist as such will never "observe" cellulose, nor a biologist a static property, and so on. If this seems reasonable, then scientific truths can be viewed as outgrowths of communities, and not observing minds. Likewise, to extend the logic, objectivity and truth are not byproducts of individual minds but of community traditions. And too, science cannot make claims to universal truth, as all truth claims are specific to particular traditions – lodged in culture and history.

This view of reality as emerging from relationships is importantly wedded to a major shift in the way we have understood language. If the picture theory of language is flawed, what is an effective replacement? Here the work of the twentieth-century philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein, has been central to constructionism. In his pivotal writing, *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein replaces the *picture metaphor* of language with that of *the game*. "What is a word really?" asks Wittgenstein. It is equivalent to asking "What is a piece in chess?"(Wittgenstein, 1978, section 7). How are we to make sense of this metaphor? Consider first the game of chess, in which two opponents take turns in moving pieces of various sizes and shapes across a checkered board. There are explicit rules about when and how each piece can be played, along with implicit rules of proper social conduct (for example, you may not curse or spit at your opponent). Here it is possible to say that each piece in the chess set acquires its meaning from the game as a whole. The small wooden chess pieces would mean nothing outside the game; however, once in the game, even the smallest pieces can topple "kings" and "queens".

Words acquire their meaning in the same way, proposes Wittgenstein. To say "good morning" gains its meaning from a game-like relationship called a greeting. There are implicit rules for carrying out greetings: each participant takes a turn, typically there

is an exchange of mutual glances, and there are only a limited number of moves that one can legitimately make after the other has said "hi, how are you?" You may respond with "great, how are you?" for example, but you would be considered "out of the game", if you responded by screaming or cuffing the other in the head. Further, the words "hi, how are you?" are generally meaningless outside the game of greeting. If we are in the midst of a heated argument on unemployment, and I suddenly say, "hi, how are you?" you would be puzzled. Have I lost my mind? Wittgenstein termed the language and the actions into which it is woven, the *language game*. (1978, section 20e) Words, then, gain their meaning through the requirements of the game. In the game of baseball, "home run" is an important term. In the same way, "atoms" feature importantly in the game of physics, and "economic class" in the game of sociology.

3. Constructions gain their significance from their social utility.

As the game metaphor suggests, as we relate together we come to develop reasonably reliable patterns of coordination. These patterns have a rule-like character; they follow a rough set of conventions about what is acceptable and what is not. It is not that our relationships *are* games; rather, they are similar in that together we have created a way of going on together. These ways of going on together not only include our words and actions, but as well the various objects, spaces, and environments around us. Thus, for example, the vocabulary of tennis (e.g. serve, volley, love three) is related not only to the movements of the players, but to the fact that they have racquets, balls, a tennis court, and available light. Wittgenstein called the entire array of relationships – words, actions, objects – a *form of life*. We might otherwise call them cultural traditions. To see our constructions as embedded in forms of life is very helpful. At the outset, we can appreciate why the terms in which we construct the world come into being. Why, for example, do Eskimos have more words for snow than people who live in warmer climes? It is because these distinctions are useful for those who live in the arctic. They can adjust their behaviour more carefully to the surrounding conditions; the distinctions could even be life saving. For the most part, world construction and social utility are interdependent.

The phrase	is useful	when you are:
"Today's specials …"		eating at a restaurant
"Strike three"		playing baseball
"I want a trim"		at the hairdressers
"I need two tickets"		going to the movies
"atomic accelerator"		smashing atoms

This view of language as gaining its meaning from its use in relationships also helps us to solve a significant problem remaining from the preceding discussion. Recall the problems confronted by the traditional view of language as a picture or reflection of the world. As pointed out, this view is wedded to the assumption that truth can be carried by language, and that some languages are closer to the truth than others. As we found, however, there is no privileged relationship between

world and word. For any situation multiple constructions are possible, and there is no means outside social convention of declaring one as corresponding more "truly" to the nature of reality than another. However, these puzzlements left us in a poor position, without answers to some very important questions. If language does not describe or explain the world as it is, then what is the status of travel guides, news reports, weather reports or scientific findings? If words don't correspond or picture the world, then how can we meaningfully warn each other that drinking and driving are a dangerous combination, or that there is an acute danger of forest fires? If we become ill, surely we would prefer the account of the trained physician to that of a child or a witch doctor. All descriptions are not equal; some seem accurate and informative while others are fanciful or absurd. If language doesn't give us a map or a picture, then how do we explain these differences in accuracy?

If we view language as gaining its meaning from its utility in our various forms of life, we have an answer to this question. When we say that a certain description is "accurate" (as opposed to or "inaccurate") or "true" (as opposed to "false") we are not judging it according to how well it pictures the world. Rather, we are saying that the words have come to function as "truth telling" within the rules of a particular game – or more generally, according to certain conventions of certain groups. In the game of soccer, we talk about "penalty kicks", and there is no question about when a penalty kick is occurring. The term is very useful to carry out the game in a fair manner, and it can be used with complete accuracy within the conventions of the game. In the same way, the proposition that "the world is round and not flat" is neither true nor false in terms of pictorial value, that is, correspondence with "what there is". However, by current standards, it is more acceptable to play the game of "round-world-truth" when flying from Kansas to Korea; and more useful to "play it flat" when touring the state of Kansas itself. Nor is it true beyond any game that the world is composed of atoms; however, "atom talk" is extremely useful if you are carrying out experiments on nuclear energy. In the same way, we can properly say that people do indeed have souls, so long as we are participating in a form of life that we call religion. The existence of atoms is no more or less true than the existence of souls in any universal sense; each exists within a particular form of life.

Let me illustrate the social process of "achieving truth" with an example from my adolescence. I was serving as a summer assistant to an ill-tempered, foul-mouthed wall plasterer named Marvin. Despite his personal shortcomings, Marvin was very good at his job. And when he climbed to the top of a ladder, his arms working the plaster to perfection on the ceiling overhead, it was crucial that I serve up mixtures of water and plastering compound exactly to his specification. At times the mixture had to be moist, so it could be subtly worked and reworked; at others it had to be dry, so that it could rapidly seal the contours. Thus, depending on his progress, he would bellow, "skosh" (for a wet mixture) and "dry-un" (for a drier compound). Of course these words meant nothing to me when I began my servitude, but within a few days I became proficient in producing the desired mixtures. In effect, "skosh" and "dry-un" became part of a form of life in which we were engaged.

Yet, consider what has been achieved as a byproduct of this primitive dance of words, actions, and objects. After two weeks of practice in this procedure, Marvin and

I could have observed a series of plaster mixtures, and with very little error, we could have agreed on which were "skosh" and which "dry-uns". And, if I said "dry-un cumin' up" this would also inform Marvin of what he might predict on that occasion. This prediction could have been confirmed or disconfirmed by what I delivered. In effect, by virtue of their function within the relational game, such terms as "skosh" and "dry-un" began to function as descriptions that could tell the truth. No, the words themselves do not describe the world; but because of their successful functioning within the relational ritual, they became truth telling.

In this context we can come to see why the term "truth" is both useful and potentially dangerous. It is useful within any given form of life, because it affirms that something is the case according to the rules or conventions of the participants. It helps the participants coordinate their actions in ways that are valuable to them. In this way, to say, "it is true that…" is an invitation for others to place their trust in you. Thus, if a biochemist reports the results of an experiment on amino acids, he or she is contributing to what biochemists take to be knowledge of the world – according to the rules of biochemistry. And, the researcher presumes that other biochemists will trust the results. If they repeat the experiment, they will find the same results. Within a tradition, the word, "truth" is most valuable. However, when the term leaps from its grounding in a specific tradition we confront the possibilities for constriction, conflict and oppression. As we saw, in accepting the biological definition of death, we radically reduce the possibilities of understanding and action. To declare that a fertilized egg is a human being runs directly against the truth that it is not. And, to pronounce that one religion worships the only true god, is a signal of conflict and oppression to come. In the name of universal truth, the world has witnessed oppression, torture, murder, and genocide.

4. As we describe and explain, so do we fashion our future.
As constructionists propose, our practices of language are bound within relationships, and our relationships are bound within broader patterns of practice. Thus, for example, words like crime, "plaintiff", "witness", and "law" are essential to carrying out the traditional practice of law; our tradition of higher education depends on a discourse of "students", "professors", "curricula", and "learning". Without these shared languages of description and explanation these institutions would fail to exist in their present form. More informally, it would be difficult to carry out a recognizable love affair without such words as "love", "need", "care", and "hope". In a broad sense, language is a major ingredient of our worlds of action; it constitutes social life itself.

Consider the implications: If we do not continue to speak the way we do, then our long-standing traditions of cultural life are under threat. If we abandon our languages of the real and the good, so do we destroy forms of life. This is easy enough to see in the case of religion. As the language of Holy spirit, sin, soul, saviour, and everlasting life are no longer used in certain sectors of society, religious institutions die out. Churches are empty, or they are turned into theatres or community centres. Sustaining one's traditions requires a continuous process of regenerating meaning together. This challenge is especially difficult in a world of rapid global change, a world in which new meanings are continuously being circulated, and new forms of

action are constantly evolving. Consider the mushrooming of social networks on the internet, and the way in which YouTube sends images of novel behaviour to millions every moment. As many believe, if institutions such as government, law, religion, education, and so on, are to survive, they must continuously modify and rework the meaning of their languages. For example, given the costs of higher education, the tradition faces a threatened future. Yet, to redefine "college education" as a goal attainable through distance learning programmes, new life is injected into the institution. In order to ensure that young people do not drop away from religion, many churches have replaced the formal and solemn services of yore with guitar and drum sing-alongs. Paradoxically, to sustain the tradition means transforming it.

Yet, constructionism is relevant not only to maintaining traditions. Rather, many are drawn to constructionist ideas because they offer a bold invitation to build new futures. Transforming ourselves, our relationships, or our culture need not await the intervention of some expert, a set of laws, force of arms, bold leaders, public policies or the like. As we speak together *right now*, we participate in creating the future – for good or ill. If we long for change, we should shake up our traditional ways of constructing the world and set out to generate new ways of making sense. Constructionism invites us to become *poetic activists*. New ways of living are not secured simply by refusing or rejecting the meanings as given, for example, avoiding sexist or racist language. Rather, the strong invitation is for the emergence of new forms of language and ways of interpreting the world. Invited are *generative discourses*, that is, ways of talking and writing or representing (as in photography, film, art, theatre, and the like) that simultaneously challenge existing traditions of understanding, and offer new possibilities for action. We shall take up the challenge of generative discourse again in Chapter 4.

5. Reflection on our taken-for-granted worlds is vital to our future well-being.
The challenge of sustaining valued traditions is one challenge; the creation of alternative futures another. Every tradition closes the doors to the new; every bold creation undermines a tradition. What shall we save; what shall we resist and destroy; what worlds should we create? These are not only complex questions, but in a world of multiple and competing constructions of the good we also see that there can be no universal answers. There is a strong tendency under these conditions to resort to "good reasons, good evidence, and good values". That is, if we simply think about a given tradition, evaluate the evidence, consider its moral and political implications, we can arrive at an acceptable conclusion. However, from a constructionist standpoint, there is reason for critical pause. The generation of good reasons, good evidence and good values is always *from within a tradition*; already accepted are certain constructions of the real and the good, and implicit rejections of alternatives. Whether we should ban smoking from public buildings, allow child pornography, oppose land mines, or support feminist liberation in Arab countries are questions that can only be treated from within some tradition of discourse. Thus, our "considered judgements" typically suppress those alternatives lying outside our tradition.

For constructionists, such considerations lead to a celebration of *critical reflexivity;* that is, the attempt to place one's premises into question, to suspend the "obvious", to listen to alternative framings of reality, and to grapple with the comparative outcomes of multiple standpoints. For the constructionist this means an unrelenting concern with the blinding potential of the "taken-for-granted". If we are to build together toward a more viable future then we must be prepared to doubt everything we have accepted as real, true, right, necessary or essential. This kind of critical reflection is not necessarily a prelude to rejecting our major traditions. It is simply to recognize them as traditions – historically and culturally situated; it is to recognize the legitimacy of other traditions within their own terms. And it is to invite the kind of dialogue that might lead to common ground.

As you can see, these five assumptions are revolutionary in their implications. We shall explore many of these implications in the remaining chapters. However, you can also imagine that because they challenge many traditional beliefs, such assumptions are highly controversial. I will take up the most important criticisms in the final chapter.

Origins of Social Construction

If my writing has been successful, the preceding arguments should seem reasonable enough. However, they have not always been regarded as reasonable. And they did not suddenly spring from nowhere. In fact, it is only within recent decades that social constructionist ideas have evolved and flowered in the form I have described. In the remainder of the chapter, I wish to discuss these developments as they have emerged in scholarly circles. Not only will this discussion help you to appreciate the deeper dimensions of constructionist ideas, but also you will begin to see more fully its revolutionary implications. Further, you will see more clearly why controversy continues. However, two cautionary notes may be helpful: First, although the arguments in this section have been enormously stimulating for many scholars, they are also more complex than the broad outline I have just sketched. Second, a full mastery of these arguments is not essential to appreciating the subsequent chapters of the book.

In my view, social construction today represents an amalgam of three major lines of dialogue. Each of these dialogues began in a separate domain of study. They were "hot ideas" within these circles. However, over time, scholars in one area began to learn of developments in another. And, as it became increasingly clear, the hot ideas in one area could be wedded to those in another. This did not mean that all agreed; tensions among these areas of study remain today. However, the force of the combinations has been so powerful that many see in them a major transformation – both in the scholarly community and Western culture more generally. This transformation has many names. The most common is *postmodernism*, where the word, "modernism" generally refers to developments in Western culture following the Enlightenment. As mentioned earlier, somewhere toward the sixteenth century, Western culture shifted from the Dark Ages of religious control, to a belief in the powers of individual reason, informed by empirical fact. (Many see science as at the centre of "modernism"

in this respect.) Often equated with the modernist world-view are the values of reason, objectivity, scientific truth, order, prediction, and control. In this sense, postmodernism represents a challenge to these values, as they have been realized in the past, and a search for more promising possibilities. Although the term postmodernism is a highly general term, social constructionism may be viewed as a specific outcome. As you will see in the following discussion, the three major movements are all critical of central modernist values. The social constructionist dialogues grow from this soil of critique, but shift the balance from critique to creativity. As later chapters will illustrate, the central hope of social constructionist practitioners is to bring forth new and more promising ways of life.

Objectivity: The Crisis of Value Neutrality

Each year I receive numerous requests from my students for recommendations. These students usually have good reason to expect my letters to be positive. But what does "positive" mean in this case? Without any sense of misrepresentation I could describe the same student as "a good worker", "an able performer", "intelligent", or "intellectually a delight". Each of these descriptions is positive; each recommends the student. But most important, I cannot select one over the other on the basis of objective accuracy So, how do I select? As you quickly realize, what is distinctive about these differing descriptors is what they suggest about my enthusiasm for the student. If I really care about the student's success, I will not describe him or her as "a good worker" or an "able performer". To be sure, the words are positive, but they convey no enthusiasm. Even "intelligent" does not carry the intensity of "intellectually a delight". Depending on my investment in the student, then, I can – without being unfair – tip the balance in one direction or another.

Now, consider the broader implications: I am a news correspondent. I am trying to write as objectively and accurately as possible about what is taking place in Afghanistan. I can describe the figures lying on the road before me as "casualties", or as "promising young men whose bodies have been ripped apart by an explosion". Neither of the descriptions is inaccurate by common standards. However, the value implications are dramatically different. In effect, when you read a newspaper, you are not receiving a value neutral, "just the news", description of what is taking place. You are absorbing a world of values. What seems to be an objective report is a cloak that masks the implicit values. If you do not recognize the implicit values, it is because you and the reporter typically share the same values.

The significance of this argument was made particularly apparent by early Marxist writings. As proposed, capitalist economic theory offers itself as an accurate reading of the world of economics. However, because the theory favours a system in which its proponents are benefited, it is suspicious. The theory rationalizes a condition in which the "haves" continue to profit through exploited labour of the "have nots". Or in Marxist terms, although seemingly neutral and objective, the theory *mystifies* the public, leading them to believe a falsehood that keeps them enslaved. Marx mounted the same argument against religious authority. Religious teachings, as Marx proposed, do not illuminate the world of spirit; rather religion serves as an "opiate of the masses", diminishing consciousness of suppression and exploitation.

Yet, this kind of critique is scarcely limited to Marxists. As social theorist Jürgen Habermas proposed in his influential volume *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1971), any search for knowledge favours certain political and economic goals over others. In this sense, virtually all authoritative accounts of the world contain implicit values. All carry ideology, that is, implicit ideas of what the political and social order *should* be like. Whether a scientist, scholar, supreme court judge, or news commentator, all are subject to *ideological critique*, that is, critique aimed at revealing the interests, values, doctrines, or myths that underlie seemingly neutral claims to truth. As ideological critique suggests, no matter how trustworthy the source, one's values inevitably lead one to select certain ways of putting things and not others. The critic asks, what has been left out, what descriptions are they suppressing? Who gains by the account? Who is being silenced, exploited, or erased?

One of the most important lines of ideological critique has been directed toward the sciences. Because the gains of science are clear to all, they seem immune to such critiques. Scientists don't seem to be ideologically invested; and their findings are open to public scrutiny. Yet, for the ideological critic, it is this seeming neutrality of science that is most misleading, most mystifying. Critical scrutiny is essential. In this light, consider Emily Martin's analysis of the ways in which biological science text, in both the classroom and laboratory, characterises the woman's body. She concludes from her analysis that the woman's body is largely portrayed as a "factory" whose primary purpose is to reproduce the species. It follows that the processes of menstruation and menopause are characterized as wasteful if not dysfunctional, for they are periods of "nonproduction". To illustrate, note the negative terms in which standard biology texts describe menstruation (italics mine): "the fall in blood progesterone and estrogen *deprives* the highly developed endometrial lining of its hormonal support"; *"constriction"* of blood vessels leads to a *"diminished* supply of oxygen and nutrients"; and when *"disintegration* starts, the entire lining begins to *slough*, and the menstrual flow begins". "The loss of hormonal stimulation causes *decrosis"* (death of tissue). Another text says that menstruation is like "the uterus crying for lack of a baby" (Martin, 1987).

Martin makes two essential points. First, these scientific descriptions are anything but neutral. In subtle ways they inform the reader that menstruation and menopause are forms of breakdown or failure. These negative implications have broad social consequences. For the woman, to accept such accounts is to alienate herself from her body. Such descriptions furnish grounds for judging herself negatively – both on a monthly basis during most of her adult years and then permanently after the years of fertility have passed. Women who are childless are condemned, by implication, for their *unproductivity*. Of equal importance, these characterizations could be otherwise. Such negative descriptions are not required by "the way things are", but reflect masculine interests, an ideology that reduces the woman to "baby maker".

To secure the case, Martin points out that there are other bodily processes – exclusive to men – that could be described in the same manner but are not. For example, in the case of ejaculation, seminal fluid picks up cells that have been shed as it flows through the male ducts. However, biological texts make no mention of males "losing" or "wasting" in describing ejaculation. In effect, many different descriptions are possible, and the dominant choice in the biological sciences reflects male interests to the detriment of women.

Martin's analysis is but one illustration of an ideological critique. It is also but a single manifestation of an enormous body of feminist critique – sophisticated and sharply pointed scholarship that spans the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Nor are Marxists and feminists the only groups to make use of ideological critique. Currently such critique is used by virtually all groups that find themselves marginalized, oppressed, misrepresented, or "unheard" by society at large; by African American, Native American, Asian American, gay and lesbian, Chicano, religious fundamentalists, and Arab activists, to name but a few. In all cases, the critique calls into question the taken-for-granted logics or realities of the dominant culture, and shows how these logics both support the self-interest of the dominant groups and perpetuate injustice.

The Critical Movement

The critiques of the values saturating all our descriptions of reality give minorities a new and powerful voice in the contemporary world. Among the liveliest movements today carry the banners of critical race theory and post-colonial critique. The critical race movement pays special attention to the way race is constructed in society, and the way these constructions are used for purposes of sustaining power and privilege. Such attention is particularly useful in matters of law, where court rulings often seem to favour those in power as opposed to minorities. For example, in matters of hate speech, court rulings often favour the dominant or white classes. Whites who burn crosses – symbolizing white supremacy – are protected by Supreme Court justices on the grounds of protecting freedom of speech. Yet, black rappers are penalized for using lyrics that express anger at whites.

The critical race movement usually focuses on people oppressed by a particular racial category (for example, black, Asian). In contrast, post-colonial critique is concerned with peoples from around the world whose cultures have been invaded by outsiders. The colonialist expansion of England, France, and Spain provides some of the most obvious cases. But cultural invasion is now subtler, and may take the form of tourism and global business expansion. The central concern is with the way in which the invaded cultures are typically discounted – viewed as somehow inferior, less developed, or backward. Their voices go unheard; their cultural traditions are either destroyed or viewed as quaint. Much post-colonial critique is embedded in novels emerging within the post-colonial populations. However, scholars increasingly pinpoint the subtle ways in which colonial attitudes continue to pervade the way the people in first world countries discredit the cultures of the "less developed" nations.

Nor is it an easy matter for the targets of such criticism to defend themselves. Any defence of what appears to be a self-serving statement will itself give rise to the same suspicion. The target can make no recourse to "the facts", because these are already described in way that seem to represent the same, self-serving investments. And, because ideological critique is typically directed against those in power – who have wealth, position, privileges, security, and the like – their defences seem especially

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flimsy. Would "the haves" say anything that wasn't designed, in the end, to protect their own interests? Some see ideological critique as a great new defender of democracy, because everyone is subject to critique, and everyone has a right to voice. No one can be pushed out of the conversation because others claim Truth. Let us now turn to a second major line of postmodern argument.

Reason on the Run: The Literary Assault

A second slide into skepticism began quietly in a small corner of the scholarly world; its once tiny voice now bellows. The beginnings can be traced to the writings of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913). In his influential volume *A course in general linguistics* ([1916], 1974) Saussure laid out the rationale for what became the discipline of *semiotics*, that is, a science focused on the systems by which we communicate. Two of Saussure's ideas are particularly important to our discussion: first, a distinction is made between the *signifier* and the *signified*, with the signifier referring to a word (or some other signal), and the signified to that which we believe is signalled by the word (that for which it stands). Thus, we have here an object (the signified), and a word we use to name it (the signifier). As Saussure proposed, *the relationship between signifiers and signifieds is ultimately arbitrary*. The point here is similar to the first constructionist proposition above: the world makes no demands as to how we talk about it. We can, in principle, use any signifier to refer to any signified. Saussure's second significant proposal was that *sign systems are governed by their own internal logics*. Put simply, our language can be described in terms of various rules, such as rules of grammar or syntax. When we speak or write we must approximate these rules (or internal logics); otherwise we fail to make sense. You will recall here Wittgenstein's concept of the language game and the demands it makes on how we talk. Making sense is a matter of following the rules of language.

Truth as Style

A lively illustration of the extent to which "truth in language" depends on convention is given in Raymond Queneau's little volume *Exercises in Style* (1981). In this work Queneau generates 195 different descriptions of a single occasion. Variously he relies on metaphor, verse, scientific notation, and other genres of writing, to give the reader a heady sense of the many ways we could describe a given situation. Consider first one of the more colourful descriptions:

> In the centre of the day, tossed among the shoals of traveling sardines in a coleopter with a big white carapace, a chicken with a long, featureless neck suddenly harangued one, a peace-abiding one, of their number, and its parlance, moist with protest, was unfolded upon the airs. Then, attracted by a void, the fledgling precipitated itself thereunto.

(Continued)

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(Continued)

> In a bleak, urban desert, I saw it again the self-same day, drinking the cup of humiliation offered by a lowly button. (p. 26)

For most of us, this account doesn't seem to be objective – true to the facts. It seems whimsical and poetic, a play with words. Let's turn to a second account:

> In the S bus, in the rush hour, a chap of about 26, felt hat with a cord instead of a ribbon, neck too long, as if someone's been having a tug-of-war with it. People getting off. The chap in question gets annoyed with one of the men standing next to him. He accuses him of jostling him every time anyone goes past. A sniveling tone which is meant to be aggressive. When he sees a vacant seat he throws himself on to it.
>
> Two hours later, I meet him in the Cour de Rome, in front of the gare Saint-Lazare. He's with a friend who's saying: "You ought to get an extra button put on your overcoat". He shows him where (at the lapels) and why. (p. 29)

Here we breathe a sigh of relief. Now we have a glimpse of what's really going on. But why do we draw such a conclusion? Is it because the language is more precise? Consider, then, good scientifically acceptable prose:

> In a bus of the S-line, 10 meters long, 3 wide, 6 high, at 3 km. 600 m. from its starting point, loaded with 48 people, at 12.17 p.m., a person of the masculine sex aged 27 years, 3 months and 8 days, 1 m. 72 cm. tall and weighing 65 kg. and wearing a hat 3.5 cm. in height around the crown of which was a ribbon 60 cm. long, interpellated a man aged 48 years 4 months and 3 days, 1 m. 68 cm. tall and weighing 77 kg., by means of 14 words whose enunciation lasted 5 seconds and which alluded to some involuntary displacements of from 15 to 20 mm. Then he went and sat down about 1 m. 10 cm. away.
>
> 57 minutes later he was 10 meters away from the suburban entrance to the gare Saint-Lazare and was walking up and down over a distance of 30 m. with a friend aged 28, 1 m. 70 cm. tall and weighing 71 kg. who advised him in 15 words to move by 5 cm. in the direction of the zenith a button which was 3 cm. in diameter. (p. 41)

Now we have precise details, without colour or passion, but again we aren't certain about "what truly happened". What is it, then, that makes one language "objectively accurate" and another "aesthetic" or "obscuring?" It does not appear to be the correspondence of the words to the world; nowhere in these accounts have we confronted "the world" to which they refer. Rather we have confronted only variations in styles of writing. Truth is a matter of "being in style".

For literary theorists this focus on language took a second significant turn We have already seen how traditional ideals of truth, objectivity, and impartiality have been challenged. Literary theorists thrust reason itself into question. Reason has long

been prized in Western culture; it is perhaps the chief virtue of the modernist world-view. As we are lead to believe it is the power to reason that sets humans above the remainder of the animal kingdom, and contributes most importantly to the capacities for human survival. Literary study suggests otherwise. Among the most important objections are those of the French literary theorist Jacques Derrida (see especially Derrida, 1997). Derrida's writings, often identified as *deconstruction-ist*, are highly ambiguous in themselves, and scholars have drawn from them in many different ways. One of these interpretations significantly undermines the value placed on human reason. First consider two major premises. On the one hand, suggests Derrida, rational arguments bring about a *massive suppression of meaning*. When we absorb a rational argument we do not know more, but less. Second, if closely examined, the *sense of reason will collapse*. Rationality, then, is not a founda-tion for anything – for our institutions of government and science, for example, or a way of deciding on what is moral or worthwhile. Rather, Derrida suggests, our "good reasons" are in the end both suppressive and empty. These are strong, even outrageous, conclusions. How can they be defended?

First, how can one conclude that rationality invites suppression, or narrows our views? Drawing from early semiotic theory, Derrida views language as a system of *differences*, a system in which each word is distinct from all others. Simply put, lan-guage is made of separate words, each distinct from all others. A formal way of talk-ing about these differences is in terms of *binaries* (the division into two). That is, the distinctiveness of words depends on a simple split between "the word" and "not the word" (or all other words). The meaning of "white", then, depends on differentiat-ing it from what is "non-white" (or "black" for instance). Word meaning depends, then, on differentiating between a *presence* (the word you have used) and an *absence* (those to which it is contrasted). To make sense in language is to speak in terms of presences, what is designated, against a backdrop of absences. As you can see, the presences are privileged; they are brought into focus by the words themselves; the absences are only there by implication. Or, we may simply forget them altogether. But take careful note: these presences would not make sense without the absences. Without the binary distinction they would mean nothing.

Let us put this argument into action: consider the widely accepted view of sci-ence, that the cosmos is made up of material. We as humans, then, are essentially material beings – whether we speak of this material in terms of neurons, chemi-cal elements, or atoms. Take away the material and there is nothing left over to call a person. Humanists and spiritualists are deeply troubled by this view; it seems to repudiate everything we hold valuable about people. We want to believe there is something that gives human life more value than an automobile or a new television. Yet, materialism as a world-view seems so obviously true! Look around you; is there anything but material? But now consider the deconstructionist's arguments: the word "material" gains its meaning only by virtue of a binary, that is, in contrast to "non-material". Consider this binary in terms of material/spirit, for example. To say, "the cosmos is material" makes no sense unless you can dis-tinguish it from what is spirit. Something identifiable as spirit must exist then, in order to say what material is. Yet, if spirit must exist in order to give material any

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meaning, then the cosmos cannot be altogether material. To put it another way, in the world-view of materialism, the spiritual world is *marginalized* (thrust into the unnoticed margins of the page). The spirit is an unspoken absence. However, without the presence of this absence, the very sense of "the cosmos is material" is destroyed. As one might say, the entire world-view of materialism rests on a suppression of the spirit.

As Derrida also proposes, in the Western tradition there are many binaries for which there is a strong tendency to privilege or value one side over the other. In Western culture we generally prize the rational over the emotional, mind over body, order over disorder, and leaders over followers. As many social critics have pointed out, there is also a tendency for the dominant groups in society to lay claim to the privileged pole, while viewing "others" as the opposite. Consider, for example, the ways in which masculinity is commonly associated with rationality, mental control, order, and leadership, while femininity is often characterized as emotional, bodily oriented, disorganized and dependent. Because of the oppressive implications of our common distinctions, deconstructionist critics are drawn to upsetting the binaries or blurring the boundaries. These issues will occupy us later in the book.

The assault on rationality does not terminate with its suppressive character. Rather, from a deconstructionist perspective we find that when rational arguments are placed under close scrutiny, reason gives way to chaos. When closely examined, reason lies empty. How is this so? Return again to the idea of language as a self-contained system, where the meaning of each term depends on its relationship to other terms. As Derrida proposes, we might see this relationship as made up of two components, *difference* and *deferral*. As we have already seen, a word first gains its meaning by virtue of differing from other words. The word "bat" has no meaning in itself, but begins to acquire meaning when it is contrasted with other terms, such as "hat" or "mat". This difference, however, is insufficient to give "bat" its meaning. Rather, the word "bat" is empty in itself; simply a syllable. In order to understand the term we must defer to other terms that will tell us what "bat" means. This possibility seems clear enough in the case of definitions. Every entry in the dictionary is defined in terms of other words. In effect, each word defers its meaning until you read its definition. But each word in the definition is also empty without deferring to still other definitions. In some cases this process of deferring is circular. For example, if you search the dictionary for the meaning of "reason", you will often find that it is a "justification". If you then look up "justification", it will be defined as "reason". Now ask yourself, what is reason outside of this circle of mutual definition?

Realize at this juncture that we have more than one choice in this process of deferring. We can, for example, say that a bat is a "flying mammal", or alternatively that a "bat" is a "wooden club used in the game of baseball". More formally, we may say that the term *bears traces* of meaning from various histories of use, in this case from biology and athletics. Realize as well that once you begin the process of trying to find the meaning of a flying mammal or a wooden club used in baseball, there is no moment at which you have final clarification. We search for traces, and we find only further

traces. In Derrida's words, "Nothing … is anywhere simply present or absent. There are only, everywhere, differences and traces of traces" (1981: 38).

To give these arguments a critical edge, consider a term such as democracy We speak about democracy as a form of government to be cherished, studied, theorized, and protected if necessary with human life. Yet, the meaning of the term "democracy" is not derived from our simply observing people moving about. The word is not a picture of people's actions. Rather, to use the term meaningfully depends on a literary distinction between "democracy" and, for example, contrasting terms such as "totalitarianism" and "monarchy". Yet, the difference alone is insufficient to understand the term. What is democracy other than "not being a monarchy"? To gain clarity we find ourselves deferring to other words, words such as "freedom" and "equality". Yet what do these latter terms mean? What exactly is "freedom" or "equality"? For clarity we defer to other terms. "Equality", we might say, is the opposite of "inequality"; it is reflected in societies that are "fair" and "just". But what precisely is "inequality", and what is it to be "fair" or "just?" The search continues, and there is no means of exiting the self-referring texts of democracy to encounter "the real thing". The meaning of democracy is fundamentally *undecidable.*

From this standpoint, whatever is put forth as a rational argument, even with clarity and confidence, masks a profound fragility – the fact that all the terms making up the argument are deeply ambiguous. Clarity and confidence can be maintained only as long as one does not ask too many questions, such as "what exactly is democracy … justice … warfare … love … depression?" and so on. When examined closely, all authoritative arguments begin to collapse … including the one you are now reading.

Scientific Knowledge as Communal Construction

These two critical movements just discussed – the one pointing to the values implicit in all accounts of the world, and the other to the shortcomings of reason – were pivotal contributions to contemporary constructionism. However, a third movement was perhaps the most broad-sweeping in impact. This movement challenged the very foundations of scientific knowledge. It is also a movement that incorporates most fully the major proposals of the first two movements. Many people consider science to be the crowning jewel of Western civilization. Where others have mere *opinions*, scientists have the hard *facts*; where others have armchair ideas, scientists produce real-world effects: cures, rockets, and atomic power. Because of our trust in scientific knowledge, science plays a major role in educational curricula, national policy-making, news reporting, criminal investigation, military planning, and more. Unlike any other authority – religious, political, ethical – scientific authority has remained virtually unchallenged.

It is precisely for these reasons that the constructionist challenge to scientific truth has been the most powerful in its consequences. At the outset, many constructionists have been concerned with the negative effects of science on society. Consider, for example, the implications of science for social equality. Enlightenment

thinking was vastly important in terms of its granting to each and every individual the right to a voice. The privilege of royalty and religion to speak for all, to rule on the nature of the real and the good, was removed. Over time science became the model for equal rights to reason. In the scientific world, everyone has the privilege of independent observation, reason, and reporting. If one follows rigorous methods of investigation he or she can demand an audience. But now consider, what do you as reader have to say about the "PE surface for polyatomic molecules", "the indeterminacy of cyclopentane-1,3-diyl", or *"Hox* genes"? Chances are you have no opinion; you know little about such matters. Moreover you may scarcely understand the phrases. So you are forced to accept these realities; and why not? Don't scientists simply "tell it like it is?" Ironically, then, this bastion of equality now functions to remove equality: all voices save its own are moved to silence. Are we witnessing here the emergence of a new breed of high priests, a subtle dictatorship for which we are merely docile bodies?

It is this possibility, this closing of the common dialogue, that spurs many scholars to open scientific knowledge to social constructionist analysis. The point of this discussion is not to undermine scientific efforts, but to remove their authority and to place them into the orbit of everyday scrutiny. The focus, then, is on scientific interpretations of the world – the choice of certain languages of description and explanation as opposed to others. Recall, no particular language is privileged in terms of its picturing the world for what it is; innumerable accounts are possible. Most importantly, because scientists do make claims to the truth, their accounts have a way of creeping out into society, of forming society's conceptions of what is the case. In response to headlines about the origins of the universe, genetic coding, and the greenhouse effect, we are not likely to say "well, that's one way of putting it". Rather, the news media report these as universal facts, and we are inclined to accept them as such – until they are corrected by other scientists. As scientific accounts enter society as "truth beyond tradition, beyond value, beyond question" so do they affect our ways of life – undermining, disrupting, and refashioning. And there is little critical questioning of these effects, not only because the common person is mystified by scientific language, but as well because scientists have traditionally been unable to escape their premises to ask reflexive questions from alternative standpoints.

Are such effects significant? Consider the way in which moral and spiritual issues have been slowly excluded from academic curricula – both in secondary education and universities – while science studies have steadily expanded. Issues of morality and spirit are, after all, not subject to empirical study, and thus, "merely speculative". There are also the more subtle effects of a curriculum that defines human beings merely as material – just objects for scientific inspection and manipulation. It is science that has reduced the enormities in human variation to a handful of racial categories, informed society that there are hereditary differences in intelligence and certain races are more intelligent than others; and has supported the idea that one's fundamental motivation in life is to sustain his/her genes. By interpreting nature in just these ways, many believe society is ill served. By understanding scientific claims

as human constructions, lodged in cultural tradition, as opposed to an objective unlocking of nature's secrets, we open spaces for dialogue in which *all people* can voice the truths and values of their traditions.

How are we to understand the evolution our understanding of science as social construction? We must turn the clock back to 1929, and the publication of Karl Mannheim's groundbreaking volume, *Ideology and Utopia* (1951). One finds four central proposals in the work, the first quite similar to the first two construction-ist principles set out above: (1) scientific theories do not spring from observation but from the scientist's social group. Then, as he proposed, (2) scientific groups are often organized around certain theories. This leads to the more interesting con-clusion that (3) theoretical disagreements are therefore issues of group conflict, and finally to the far-reaching conclusion that (4) what we assume to be scien-tific knowledge is therefore a byproduct of a social process. These suppositions reverberated widely. Ludwig Fleck's 1935 work, *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact* proposed that in the scientific laboratory, "one must know before one can see". By this he meant that one must participate in the assumptions of a social group before he or she can know what to look for. In England, Peter Winch's influential volume *The Idea of a Social Science* (1946) demonstrated ways in which theoretical propositions are "constitutive of the phenomena" of the social science. By this he meant that when we single out a phenomenon and define it in a certain way, we create the world in which we live. This idea later became the basis for *labelling theory* in sociology.[1] In this case, scholars were con-cerned with the way in which the labels we give to phenomena come to be self-fulfilling. Thus, to call a given behaviour a "criminal act", creates what we take to be crime, and as well, a population of criminals.

An important milestone in these developments is represented in Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's 1966 volume, *The Social Construction of Reality.* They focused in particular on the scientist's private experience of the world – what is seen, heard, or distinguished by touch. As they proposed, these experiences can be traced to the social sphere. In their terms, we are socialized into *plausibility structures*, that is, conceptual understandings of the world and rational supports for these understandings. As we come to rely on these plausibility structures, so do we develop a *natural attitude*, that is, a sense of a natural, taken-for-granted reality. They write:

> I apprehend the reality of everyday life as an ordered reality" … Its phenomena are prearranged in patterns that seem to be independent of my apprehension of them … The language used in everyday life continuously provides me with the necessary objecti-fication and posits the order within which these make sense and within which every-day life has meaning for me … In this manner language marks the co-ordinates of my life in society and fills that life with meaningful objects. (1966, p. 21)

To illustrate, consider the way in which we seem to experience time, and the way in which the clock (an eighteenth-century invention) now orders our life. As Berger and Luckmann write,

All my existence in this world is continuously ordered by [clock time] … I have only a certain amount of time available for the realization of my projects, and the knowledge of this affects my attitude to these projects. Also, since I do not want to die, this knowledge injects an underlying anxiety into my projects. Thus I cannot endlessly repeat my participating in sports events. I know that I am getting older. It may be that this is the last occasion on which I have the chance to participate … (p. 26)

In effect, we construct the idea of clock time, and now it comes to dominate our everyday life.

These were all important developments in constructionist view of scientific knowledge. However, it was in the social ferment of the late 1960s that the major explosion occurred, primarily revolving around Thomas Kuhn's *The structure of scientific revolutions* (1962). The title of the work was not only resonant with the revolutionary spirit of the time, but also fuelled the fires of those who criticized scientists for their complicity in the Vietnam war. Kuhn's work became, at one time, the most widely cited work in the English language – including the Bible. Most importantly, this work represented a frontal challenge to the longstanding presumption that scientific knowledge is progressive, that with continued research – testing hypotheses against reality – we come ever closer to the truth. Few can doubt, for example, that the shift from a Ptolemaic view of the earth as the centre of the universe to the Copernican account of the earth's revolutions around the sun is not progress; or that the shift from Newtonian mechanics to relativity theory in physics is not a gain in understanding. Kuhn did, and his reasoning sent shock waves across the intellectual world. As Kuhn proposed, our propositions about the world are embedded within *paradigms,* roughly a network of interrelated commitments to a particular theory, conception of a subject matter, and methodological practices (or "form of life" in Wittgenstein's terms). Thus, even our most exacting measurements are only sensible from within the paradigm. A look into a microscope tells you nothing unless you are already informed about the nature of the instrument and what you are supposed to be looking at. Here Kuhn is at one with his predecessors.

What we call progress in science, for Kuhn, is not then movement from a less to a more objectively accurate paradigm. Objective accuracy is only achieved from within the terms of the paradigm. Findings within an alternative paradigm are *incommensurable,* that is, beyond measurement from another perspective (for example, a neurologist cannot measure the depth of a soul because the soul is not a fact within neurology). Rather, new paradigms are generated by *anomalies,* data that fall outside the range of problems capable of solution within a given paradigm. As new problems are explored, so do they give rise to alternative paradigms – new conceptions, apparatus, and objects of study. Scientific revolution is not progressive, in the sense of arriving ever closer to the truth; rather, we shift horizontally, from one paradigm to another. For Kuhn, "the scientist with a new paradigm sees differently from the way he had seen before" (1970, p. 115) While Kuhn subsequently came to regret the radical implications of his arguments, others extended them with even greater force.[2] No longer was it possible to justify science as a quest for *the* truth.

Researching the Researcher

These early works on science as social construction now give rise to an enormous range of scholarship exploring the social processes responsible for what we accept as scientific knowledge. For example, many social scientists study scientific research practices much as they would the practices of a primitive tribe. They sit in on the research meetings, ask probing questions, and watch the researchers practise in the laboratory. In one pivotal study, Latour and Woolgar (1979) spent hundreds of hours studying the way scientists in the Jonas Salk laboratories negotiate with each other to determine what will count as a scientific fact as opposed to opinion. They were sensitive to the way a scientist's commitment to a theory or to a measuring device could influence what counted as good data. They could witness the way in which the availability of grant funds and journal publication policies influence what was considered important and how the research was described. Historians are also active in exploring the social history of science. For example, the historian Stephen Shapin (1995) has traced the history of the very idea of truth, and the way in which our contemporary views of truth in science have their origins in the polite exchanges among gentlemen of the seventeenth century. Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison (2007) have explored the way in which the concept of "objectivity" has shifted over time, and how various techniques have been used in making claims that one's account is "true to nature". Why do we presume, for example, that an atomic accelerator reveals secrets about the basic matter making up our cosmos, or that an MRI tells us about the neural basis of psychological dispositions? It is not obviously the case, and many other stories could be told.

Yet, in spite of the enormous significance of this work, it is also important not to draw the misleading conclusion that scientific knowledge is so much hot air. These arguments do remove the sanctity of science, that somehow the sciences reveal the secrets of nature, that they are value free, and that they progress toward the Truth. However, this is not at all to disregard the outcomes of science, nor such propositions as "smoking causes cancer" or "high blood pressure often leads to heart disease". Within certain groups of scientists such propositions may be fully verified. And, because the values shared within these groups are also common to large segments of the public, the findings of the sciences may be enormously valuable to others. To be sure, "cancer" is a social construction, just as the biological construction of "death". However, vast sectors of the population are willing to share these definitions with scientists, and the underlying value placed on biological life as opposed to death. We are dealing here with agreements in practical value, not in matters of Truth. At the same time, constructionists recognize the multiplicity of values in the world, and the possibility that what is practically valuable for some may be oppressive for others. Cloning, stem cell production, and genetic programming are cases in point.

From Despair to New Directions

These three intellectual movements – the first illuminating the values inherent in all constructions of reality, second the fragility of rational argument, and finally, the social basis of scientific knowledge – are all major contributions to contemporary dialogues in social construction. There are other contributions indeed worth exploring. For example, there are major critiques of the presumption of independent and autonomous selves, which we shall take up in Chapter 5. There is also the *constructivist* movement, which has been centrally concerned with the way in which the world is constructed or construed by individual minds.[3] The central message here is that our actions are based not on the way the world is, but on the meaning it has for this individual. Although resonant with constructionist views, constructivists tend to place meaning within the mind of the individual, while social constructionists locate the origin of meaning in relationships.[4] Buddhist thought has also come to play an important role in the constructionist dialogues. As Buddhism has long advocated, human suffering largely originates in the categories (or languages) with which we understand the world and ourselves. If we did not distinguish between success and failure, and place such value on being successful, for example, we would not suffer because of failure. Meditation is one way in which these categories of understanding can be suspended (deconstructed).[5] As we shall also find in the pages to follow, numerous practitioners – in education, therapy, organizational change, social work, and more – have also been active contributors to the constructionist dialogues.

As you can see, these various movements – when considered together, pose major challenges to longstanding assumptions and time-honoured goals. For many, this new transformation is catastrophic. It represents the erosion of beliefs central to our ways of life, including our sense of truth and morality, the value of the individual self, and the promise of a better future. Traditions of democracy, religion, education, and nationhood are all placed under threat. Of course, you may also reply by varying that constructionist ideas do little more than raise questions about the foundations of otherwise robust traditions. So what that all that we have taken to be objectively true is socially constructed? Why not acknowledge this and get on with life as usual? We have "our beliefs" in reality and reason, and they support "our ways of life". They don't need foundations any more than our tradition of eating three as opposed to five meals a day. This is just the way we do it; full stop.

Yet, we must pause at this point to ask who is the "we" who rests satisfied with these traditions? First, it is clear that the family of suppositions and practices in question are all byproducts of Western culture, and chiefly byproducts of recent centuries. If we simply take them for granted, we stop asking questions. In particular, we fail to ask about the downside – what are the negative repercussions for the various peoples making up society. Further, we fail to address whether these Western beliefs and practices can successfully function within the new century. For example, with the development of globe-spanning technologies of communication and transportation – from telephone, radio, television and jet transportation to computers, satellite transmission, the internet, and world wide web – the world's peoples increasingly confront each other. Rather than the *global village* for

which many hoped (Mcluhan & Powers, 1989), we confront increasing numbers of contentious factions, expansionist movements, exploitative practices, animosities and resistances. Under these conditions we must ask whether any culture, and particularly a powerful one, can afford commitment without question? Consider some of the implications of our traditional commitments to truth, reason and moral principles.

Cultural Imperialism

As elsewhere, we in the West typically presume the universality of its truths, reasons, and morals. Our scientific truths are not "ours" in particular, we hold, but candidates for universal truth. That the world is made up of atoms and individuals who possess emotions is not for us a matter of cultural belief. Any reasonable person would reach the same conclusion. Yet, as we presume the reality and truth of our own beliefs, so do we trample on the realities of others. We unwittingly become cultural imperialists, suppressing and antagonizing. For example, while a visiting professor in Japan, a senior professor confided in me his sense of loneliness and isolation. Bitterly he recounted the years after the Second World War, when the Americans re-organized the university. Before the Americans, he recounted, all the professors in his department shared the same large office. "We talked, shared, and laughed. The Americans thought this 'backward', and re-organized the university so that each professor was placed in a separate office. Each should do his or her independent work. As my friend confided, now we don't talk, share or laugh very much". Modernism at work. The reaction can be far more bitter. Consider the sentiments of a Maori from New Zealand:

> Psychology ... has created the mass abnormalization of Maori people by virtue of the fact that Maori people have been ... recipients of [English] defined labels and treatments ... Clinical psychology is a form of social control ... and offers no more "truth" about the realities of Maori people's lives than a regular reading of the horoscope page in the local newspaper. (Lawson-Te Ano, 1993)

Knowledge and the New Totalitarianism

Enlightenment ideas were highly successful in undermining the totalitarian rule of royalty and religion. We hold that each individual is endowed with powers of observation and reason, and thus an inalienable right to participate in the process of governance. While we continue to cherish this right, we have also seen this prizing of individual knowledge as contributing to the rise of science, objectivity and truth. As scientific communities have grown strong, so have they developed specialized vocabularies, methodologies, forms of analysis and practices of reason. Thus, as suggested earlier, we confront the emergence of a new "knowledge class", groups that claim superiority of voice over all others. Further, without initiation into the class (typically through an advanced degree) one cannot challenge these claims. Opinions based on anything other than the standards of the knowledge class – for example, on personal values, spiritual insights, commitments to another tradition – are largely discounted. In effect, where the Enlightenment initially functioned to democratize

the society, it has now succeeded in generating a new form of totalitarianism.[6] As many now feel, "when the trumpets of truth begin to sound, run for cover!"

It is in this context that the constructionist dialogues offer enormous promise. They invite us to reflect on our assumptions and practices, and most importantly, to construct new forms of understanding and new ways of conducting our lives together. Especially important, they emphasize the importance of collaborative participation. We have succeeded in creating a world of massive division and conflict; we confront the catastrophic consequences of our constructions. Could we not together create new possibilities?

The Present Volume

In the present chapter I have tried to sketch out a set of proposals that are somewhere toward the centre of the contemporary dialogues on social construction. I have also tried to illuminate some of the major lines of scholarship giving rise to these dialogues. This chapter has also placed many traditional understandings and practices in peril. In that sense, it has emphasized criticism of the past as opposed to building toward new futures. In the remainder of the book, the emphasis will shift toward the positive potentials of a constructionist orientation. In Chapter 2 we shall explore the way in which our constructions of the real, the rational and the good come into being. We shall consider the pivotal place of these constructions in sustaining our ways of life, our values, and our relationships. At the same time, we shall confront the potentials of our constructions to imprison us. In Chapter 3 we take up the question of research in the social sciences. Although constructionism does raise significant questions regarding traditional empirical research, these research methods are not abandoned. At the same time, the constructionist dialogues open new and exciting possibilities for study. These will be the primary focus of the chapter. In Chapter 4, we turn to the social construction of the self. This chapter will sketch out the major critiques of the traditional view of self as independent decision maker. It will then explore the attempt of constructionist scholars to generate an alternative conception, one that places major value on relationship as opposed to the self.

In Chapters 5 and 6, we move from these more scholarly concerns to fields of practice. In Chapter 5 the special concern is with forms of dialogue holding promise for reducing conflict and hostility. Of special concern will be practices of transformative dialogue, especially useful in their bridging alien constructions of the world. Chapter 6 explores the flowering of new practices favoured by social constructionism. Attention will be directed specifically to psychotherapy, organizational management, education, and forms of scholarly communication. In each case we locate new possibilities for coordinating relations to build new futures.

Throughout these discussions you will certainly experience reservations – possibly even strong criticisms. You could scarcely grow up in modern society without some doubts about what will unfold here. In the final chapter, Chapter 7, I shall consider some of the major criticisms of social constructionist ideas. Issues of truth, objectivity, science, moral relativism, political activism, and the like will all be treated. You are welcome to peek into this chapter at any point you find yourself resisting.

Reflection

For over 25 years I have been deeply involved with the development of constructionist ideas. They have entered my relations with academic colleagues and students, therapists, organizational managers, peace workers, friends, family, and more. Early in my career I was a committed "modernist". I conducted experiments, tested theories, and generally sensed that I was contributing to truth and progress for all. As I became increasingly secure in my profession as a psychologist, I slowly began to reflect on the premises and promises. Doubt emerged, then skepticism, and finally pointed critique. I was scarcely alone in this shift; it was everywhere in evidence. This should be obvious from the pages of this chapter. In recent years, however, I have become far more optimistic. I have come to see that in a constructionist frame, we can move beyond both traditionalism and skepticism. Social construction may grow from the soil of critique, but this does not mean abandoning the past. This is primarily because unlike any other world view that I know of, *constructionism does not seek to establish the truth of its own premises*. It recognises that constructionism is itself socially constructed. Constructionism is not, then, a candidate for the truth. Nor is it a belief system. Rather, the constructionist dialogues represent invitations to a way of understanding. As constructionist ideas enter our ways of talking, they may also transform our actions. The major question asked from a constructionist perspective is "what happens to our lives together" when we construct the world in various ways? Yes, reflective critique is invited, criticism, even of constructionist ides themselves. But all criticism is from "some point of view" or perspective, with no more foundations than any other. Thus, criticism is to be viewed as a invitation to dialogue, as opposed to an attempt to eradicate. Most important, however, is the constructionist message: the moment we begin to speak together, we have the potential to create new ways of being.

Notes

1   For a more recent account, see Link, B.G. & Phelan, J.C. (1999) The labelling theory of mental disorder. In A.V. Horwitz & T.L. Scheid (Eds.). *Handbook for the study of mental health*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

2   For Kuhn's regrets, see Kuhn, T.S. (1977). *The essential tension*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. For a more extreme view of the social determination of science, see Barnes, B. (1974) *Scientific knowledge and sociological theory*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; Bloor, D. (1976) *Knowledge and social imagery*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

3   See, for example, the *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*.

4   The compromise is represented in a position sometimes called *social constructivism*. This view may be contrasted with *radical constructivism*, in which everything outside the individual mind is placed in question – including other minds. Social constructionism also tends to be radical in this regard, placing individual minds in question. We shall take up this issue in Chapter 4.

5   An account of the relationship between social construction and Buddhism can be found in Gergen, K.J. & Hoskins, D.M. (2006) If you meet social construction along the road, a dialogue with Buddhism. In M. Kwee, K.J. Gergen, & F. Koshikawa (Eds.). *Horizons in buddhist psychology*. Chagrin Falls, OH: Taos Institute Publications.

6   See, for example, Willard, C.A. (1998) *Expert knowledge: liberalism and the problem of knowledge*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Further Resources

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