It was hilarious. We were showing our grandson Sean photographs from “the old days”, those old black and white Kodak prints of grandparents, early motor cars, vintage clothing and the like. A good thing, we felt, that this little four-year-old learns about his ancestors. When the photo show was over, Sean looked up slowly and thoughtfully asked, “In the old days was everything in black and white?” We roared with laughter… Only later did we begin to think about the deeper implications. Consider:

- We usually assume that photographs tell us the truth about their object. Sean did exactly this, and we laughed.
- If a black and white photo were used as evidence in a trial, we would say that it tells us the truth. So, whether a photo tells the truth seems to be a matter of
social convention. To illustrate further, the two photos below are both portraits of a young friend Thomas. “Portraits?” you might say, “Only one is a portrait; I haven’t a clue about the other.” In fact, the other is a close-up of Thomas’s nostril. So, why, then, is one obviously a portrait, and the other not? Again, whether the photo tells the truth seems to be a matter of social agreement.

![Figure 1.1 Rijssman photos](image)

You may realize this as well when a friend shows you a photo of yourself; the friend loves it, and you feel, “ugh, that’s not how I look.”

You may want to stop the show at this moment to tell me that Sean was just wrong in assuming the photo was true. “After all, the world is in color!” But is it? Stroll in the forest at midnight, and what colors do you see? Ask experimental psychologists if the world is colored. They will tell us that our experience of color results from light reflected on the retina. For them, colored photos don’t tell the truth about nature.

So, here we have an interesting premise: **whether a photo tells us the truth about its object is a matter of social agreement.** If this seems reasonable, let’s take another step: what about our verbal descriptions of the world? After all, we use words to describe the world just as we use photos. We even argue that photos are more accurate than words in revealing the truth. But can words tell us the truth, regardless of social agreement?

This is not a trivial matter. Isn’t the aim of science to reveal the truth about the world? Don’t jury trials seek to determine guilt or innocence on the basis of the facts? Don’t we trust certain newspapers to tell us about what is “really going on”? We institutionalize people because they are “out of touch with reality”? Is truth in all these cases just a matter of social agreement? These can be issues of life and death.

Let’s press the case: Consider your name… Erik, Carol, Juan…. Your friends and family all use such names to talk about you. “Juan is away at college”, “Carol
has a job now”, “Erik is ill”. And these statements are treated as if they are true or false. Whether Erik is really ill or not makes a difference. At the same time, the names were chosen; you could have been given many other names. So, whether “Juan is away at college” depends on whether we agree with your parents to call you Juan. It also follows that whether you are “away at college” depends on what we are willing to call “away” and “college”. Does “away” mean two miles or two thousand? Does “college” include the “college of life”? So, the truth of such statements altogether depends on our agreements on how to use language. Now consider: is it possible that the following statements are neither true nor false, outside of social agreement?

- The world is round.
- The world is divided into seven continents.
- There are two genders: men and women.
- Smoking causes cancer.
- The President of Russia has two heads.
- The LA Lakers is a tennis team.

As I said, how you answer this question is not trivial. So, let’s not rush into answering. But what you do have here is an opening glimpse of the drama called social construction. The basic proposal is simple and straightforward: what we take to be the truth about the world importantly depends on the social relationships of which we are a part. But that is only the beginning. When you enter the logics of social construction, your world will begin to change. You will begin to question such long honored words as “reality”, “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, and begin to create new ways of going on – not only in your personal life, but also in professions of research, education, therapy, health care, management, and more.

As one student put it, “Once you get into constructionist ideas, all the furniture begins flying out the window.” And, because of their energizing power, you will find constructionist ideas and practices are now explored in all corners of the world. You may travel from Buenos Aires to Helsinki, from London to Beijing, from New Delhi to Melbourne and find lively discussions of these issues. As many believe, these ideas may be vital to the world’s future. If we understand that our claims to what is real, true, or moral are human constructions, born within culture and history, then we might be more tolerant and curious about those from whom we differ. 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.

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 on-going, 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. In this chapter, I will first outline a number of major proposals that are 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 as to 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*

As I mentioned, the basic constructionist idea is simple enough. But with the next step you can begin to appreciate the fuller drama. Let’s take 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 the world for what it is, and carefully study and think about it, we can learn how to save the forests, build strong buildings, improve the health of children, and so on. Such an orientation is often called *realism*. 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 in her stroller. Her gaze seems to move past trees, buildings and cars without notice; she does not seem to distinguish men from women. William James, a trailblazer in American psychology, 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 that these are pine trees, we see an advertisement for a TV show on the passing bus, and notice the policeman on the corner. In Julie’s world there are no men and women, no pine trees, no advertisements, and no police. What reaches our eyeballs may not differ 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. Through participation in relationships *the world comes to be what it is for us*. And, as Julie grows up, she will come to construct the world in much the same way we do.
Different Yous from Different Views

Who are you, really? Consider the possible realities.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>To the:</th>
<th>You are:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Biologist</td>
<td>a mammal”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hairdresser</td>
<td>“needing a cut”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>“college material”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gay man</td>
<td>“possibly straight”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>“a sinner”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent</td>
<td>“surprisingly successful”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artist</td>
<td>“an excellent model”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychologist</td>
<td>“slightly neurotic”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physicist</td>
<td>“an atomic composition”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Banker</td>
<td>“a future customer”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctor</td>
<td>“a hypochondriac”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hindu</td>
<td>“in an imperfect state of Atman”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lover</td>
<td>“a wonderful person”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ifalukian</td>
<td>“filled with liget”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

And if you were to describe yourself, whose terms would you use? From what traditions would they borrow? If you chose to create your own language, who would understand you?

Now let’s rephrase the basic constructionist idea and 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 describe 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 or tradition of understanding. To be sure, there is something, but when you try to describe what that something is, you will inevitably rely on some tradition of sense making.

To illustrate, if a friend tells you, “My grandfather died”, he or she is usually speaking from a biological standpoint. The event is defined as the termination
of certain bodily functioning. But this is only one point of view. From other traditions we might also say, “He has gone to heaven”, “He will live forever in my 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”. The descriptions are quite different, but within their own traditions, each is a legitimate alternative to the biological view. And, for little Julie, the event in question 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, for example, we will find much to complain about. There are the daily pressures, the lack of money, the lack of opportunity, and so on. In other conversations we find ourselves excited, enthusiastic, and hopeful. The world itself is neither filled with problems nor interesting and exciting events. “Problems” don’t exist in the world as independent facts; rather, we construct worlds of good and bad, and define what stands in the way of what we value as “a problem”. If the conversation could be changed, all that we construct as “problems” could be reconstructed as “opportunities”. In effect, to choose a relationship is to choose a world and how you live in it.

Herein also lies the possibility for unlimited creativity: as long as we make the familiar distinctions, for example, between men and women, day and night, or good and bad, life remains relatively predictable. Most everybody around you probably makes these distinctions, and lives their life accordingly. Yet, because these entire ways of life are built upon social consensus, all that we take for granted can also be challenged. As we speak together, we can also bring new worlds into being. We could, for example, construct a world in which there are three genders, the “mentally ill” are “spiritual healers”, or where “the power” in the organization lies not with the leaders, but the workers. The freedom to create and change is always with us – even in your next conversation!

It is at this point that you can begin to appreciate the enormous potential of constructionist ideas. For constructionists, our actions are not constrained by anything traditionally accepted as true, rational, or right. Standing before us is a vast spectrum of possibility, an endless invitation to innovation. This is not to say that we should abandon all that we take to be real and good because it is socially constructed. Not at all! It is only because we socially construct that there are meaningful realities, and valued actions. But simultaneously, 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.
THE SOCIAL ORIGINS OF THE REAL AND THE GOOD

With this fundamental vision at hand, we can now explore more deeply some of the central assumptions at play. Let’s begin with the traditional idea of knowledge – how you know, for example, your weight, your shoe size, or the number of square feet in the room you are now occupying. Generally, you might say, I have measures of these things. “To find out my weight, I step on the scales and measure it.” Simple enough, and indeed roughly similar assumptions form the basis of what we take to be scientific knowledge. In basic terms, we make a fundamental distinction between the world and the person – the experiencing agent, or subject, and the experienced object. As often put, we acquire knowledge of the world through careful observation, coupled with rational thinking. Through observation we begin to differentiate among objects – for example, species and sub-species – and to formulate theories about them. In the case of your weight, for example, we make measurements (for example, in pounds or kilos), and if you are like many people, you have pretty good ideas about the conditions under which you gain or lose weight. As scientists might put it, one tests a developing theory against further observations. Formally, we test hypotheses. Does your weight reduction program actually reduce your weight or not? If a given diet fails to reduce your weight, you abandon it. With enough research you might begin to differentiate what kinds of weight loss programs are effective for different people. Now your theory becomes more inclusive, and as we say, provides an increasingly accurate “picture” of the world. Through systematic observation and careful thought, we move toward objective, value neutral, Truth about the world.

Figure 1.2  Empiricist conception of knowledge. “I observe, I think, and I inform others.”
Now, if you felt a little resistance to this account of knowledge, you may be ahead of the game. Because if you had really absorbed the message of the preceding section, you would see problems lurking in this standard – though painfully abbreviated – account. Let me expand on the critique with four constructionist proposals:

1. The ways in which we describe and explain the world are 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 requires the word, “weight”. At the age of three you could watch people all day, and never wonder how much they weighed. 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 is 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, planes 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 – but it also suggests there is nothing we can hold on to, nothing solid on which we can rest our beliefs, nothing secure. Isn’t this nihilistic?

We will return to the question of nihilism shortly, but perhaps this state of insecurity is not as bad as it might seem. In daily life, many of our common “ways of putting it” lead to untold suffering. Consider the distress and even death that have resulted from such phrases as:

“This is mine.”

“He is to blame.”

“She didn’t pass the test.”

“The intelligence scores of this group are superior to that group.”

“The fertilized egg is a human being.”

“There is only one God.”

“We are the master race.”
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 all as optional. We have choices…

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*

Let’s return to Julie for a moment. As she develops she will begin to describe the world in terms of “pine trees” and be able to tell us that there is a “policeman”, and an “advertisement” on the “bus”. It’s also clear that Julie learned how to use these words in her relations with others. In effect, *she had to have the relations before she could describe the world in a way that we would call accurate*. I bring attention to this last sentence because it flies in the face of the longstanding view that language can provide an accurate picture the world. According to this picture metaphor, some descriptions provide a more accurate picture of events than others. You might agree that “I am reading a book” at this moment is a better picture of what you are doing than saying you are “riding an elephant”. But, you didn’t get the phrase “reading a book” from observing; you acquired it from other people. And most importantly, you also learned when to apply it. So, *it’s only by social agreement that the picture theory works*. Recall here the case of the photographic portraits; a portrait is only a portrait because we all agree that it is.

Most important here is the work of the twentieth-century philosopher, Ludwig Wittgenstein. In his pivotal writing, *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein replaces the picture metaphor of language with that of the game. Words acquire their meaning, proposes Wittgenstein, through the way they are used in what he called *language games*. If I say “good morning” to you, chances are you will reply with something equivalent (for example, “good morning to you, too,” or “hi, how are you”). Let’s call this a “greeting game”. We both know what kinds of words are used on those occasions, what you say and what I say in return. It’s much like tennis, in which you hit the ball and I try to hit it back to you. The meaning of our words, however, is wholly dependent on their use in the game. You can’t say “good morning” at just any old time and place you wish – without your sanity being questioned. Walking about and saying good morning to all the parking meters might possibly land you in a doctor’s office. But in the game of a greeting, “good morning” is perfectly understandable. Words, then, gain their meaning through the tradition 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. Words can function like pictures, but only within a game.

3. Constructions gain their significance from their social utility.

As the game metaphor suggests, through our relationships we often 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. Importantly, however, these ways of going on include not only our words and actions, but also the various objects, spaces, and environments around us as well. Thus, for example, the language game we use in tennis – including such words as “serve”, “deuce”, and “thirty love” – is related not only to the movements of the players, but also 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. What we do in a classroom together is thus a form of life, as is a dinner party, or having a romance.

Understanding that our linguistic constructions are embedded in forms of life is very helpful. At the outset, we can appreciate how the terms in which we construct the world come into being. Why, for example, do Inuits 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 behavior more carefully to their view of the surrounding conditions; the distinctions could even be life saving. For the most part, world construction and social utility are closely allied.

**The phrase is useful when you are:**

- “Today’s specials …” eating at a restaurant
- “Strike three” playing baseball
- “I want a trim” at the hairdresser’s
- “I need two tickets” going to the movies
- “Atomic accelerator” smashing atoms’

This view of language as acquiring 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 to the nature of reality more than another. However, such conclusions seem to leave
us in the untenable position of saying there is no difference between true and false accounts, or in effect, any description of the world is as true as any other. 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 a tornado is on the way? 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. What can constructionists say to this?

Again, let’s return to the proposition that language gains its meaning from its utility in our various forms of life. When we say that a certain description is “accurate” (as opposed to “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 playing 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 Cologne; 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 what we call 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 to the world” than the existence of souls in any universal sense; each is a reality within a particular form of life.

In this context we can come to see why the term “truth” is both essential to our lives, but 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 given tradition, the word “truth” is most valuable. However, when “the truth” leaps from its location within a specific tradition we confront the possibilities for suppression, conflict and oppression. As we saw, in accepting the biological definition of death, we radically reduce the possibilities of understanding and action. And, to pronounce that any given 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 torture, murder, and genocide. Let us abandon the idea of *Truth* (universal, for all people at all times), and replace it with multiple *truths*, useful ways of communicating for various peoples at various times.

4. Values are created and sustained within forms of life – including science.

As we relate together, develop languages, and trusted patterns of living so do we develop values. Most of these values are implicit; they are simply present in “our way of doing things”. If a classmate suddenly rose from his seat during a lecture, and screamed at the lecturer, “go to hell”, you would be astounded, and probably consider this a rude intrusion. There are no written rules that condemn such behaviour, but with each lecture we attend we pay homage to the unwritten rule of polite listening. This line of reasoning is straightforward enough. The drama begins when you apply it to statements of objective fact – that is, supposedly neutral or value-free accounts. For example, we like to think that some newspapers are more objective than others, and we prefer those that we can rely on. But, what if I were a news correspondent 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 “five 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. If you do not recognize the implicit values, it is because you and the reporter typically share the same values. As we shall see very shortly, the same may be said of scientific truths; they are never value-neutral. To accept a scientific report is to favor a way of life. At this point these four constructionist proposals can be summarized with the following figure:

![Figure. 1.3 Constructionalst conception of knowledge: “We relate and I interpret.”](image-url)
Contrasting this figure with the previous, you will see that what we take to be knowledge does not begin with the lone individual observing and recording the world for what it is. Rather, as we confront the world, our descriptions and explanations emerge from our existence in relationships. It is out of relationships that we foster our vocabularies, assumptions, and theories about the nature of the world (including ourselves), and the way we go about studying or carrying out research. These relationships also favor certain values, either explicit or implicit. What we take to be knowledge of the world will always carry the values of those traditions that fashion our inquiry and our conclusions.

**Toward a New Enlightenment**

There is an important sense in which this constructionist view is revolutionary; it challenges some four centuries of Western tradition. As we understand this tradition, 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. This shift is often called the Enlightenment, and equated with the emergence of “modernism” and the rise of science. The hero of the Enlightenment story is Galileo. As he is often portrayed, by using systematic observation and keen reason, he was able to unseat the dogmatic view of the Catholic Church, that the earth is the center of the universe. And he was able to vindicate the view that the earth orbits around the sun, a view that we accept today as “the truth”. Yet, as argued here, Galileo’s view is not so much true as it is useful for certain purposes. Moreover, there are no lone heroes in science or other spheres of knowledge making. All research is based on assumptions or understandings and these assumptions and understandings are forged within relationships. We move, then, from an individualist conception of knowledge making to a social one.

The implications here are far-reaching, as Enlightenment ideas also fortify a conception of society as constituted by individuals. It is this conception that gave rise to institutions of democracy and public education. It is also a view that places individual care in the center of our concern. I will have much more to say about this in Chapter 4. However, as proposed here, *everything we take to be real, rational or good – everything we hold dear – finds its origins in our processes of relating*. In effect, our worlds and our traditions are held together by *nothing stronger* than what we share *together*. And these relations are fragile. A few harsh words can do permanent damage to a relationship. Friendships, families, and organizations can suffer and even die as a result of a few ill-chosen words. We move, then, toward a new form of Enlightenment, in which *care for relationships* is primary.

**GROUNDING DIALOGUES ON SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION**

If my writing has been successful, the preceding arguments should seem reasonable enough. However, they have not always been regarded as reasonable. They have been the subject of enormous controversy (see Chapter 9). 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 will 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 sketches I am supplying here. If your curiosity is aroused, I have provided further reading at the chapter’s end. Second, a full mastery of these arguments is not essential to appreciating the subsequent chapters of the book. However, if you like to play with ideas, the following will be great fun.

In my view, social construction today represents an amalgam of three major lines of argument. Each of these arguments began in a separate domain of study. They were “hot ideas” within these circles. However, over time, scholars in each area began to learn of developments in the others, and realized that the hot ideas in one area could be wedded to the others. 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 them as laying the groundwork for a major, historical transformation – both in the scholarly community and Western culture more generally. Many names have been applied to this transformation, such as post-empiricism and post-foundationalism. But the most common is postmodernism, where the word, “modernism” generally refers to developments in Western culture following the Enlightenment.

As you will see in the following discussion, the three major movements are all critical of central modernist ideas. The social constructionist dialogues grow from this soil of critique, but they 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.

**Ideological Critique: What are the Politics?**

Earlier I pointed out the way in which our language invariably carries with it traditions of value. As proposed, there are no value-free statements of fact. Fifty years ago it would have been difficult to make sense of that proposal, so strong was the view that in science, news reporting, and courts of law, for example, unbiased accounts of the facts were possible. That my proposal could seem at all reasonable owes a great deal to academic developments. One could trace the influence to early Marxist writings. As Marx proposed, capitalist economic theory offers itself as an accurate reading of the world of economics. However, because the theory favors a system in which its proponents are benefited, it is suspicious. The theory rationalizes a condition in which the “haves” continue to profit through the exploited labor of the “have-nots”. Or in Marxist terms,
although seemingly neutral and objective, capitalist theory *mystifies* the public, leading people 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 the spirit; rather, religion serves as an “opiate of the masses”, diminishing the consciousness of suppression and exploitation.

Yet, this kind of critique is scarcely limited to Marxists. Virtually all authoritative accounts of the world contain implicit values. All carry an 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 political aims that underlie their 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 medical textbooks characterize the female body. She concludes from her analysis that a 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 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 makes two essential points. First, these scientific descriptions are anything but neutral. In subtle ways they inform the reader that menstruation and the 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. The 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” cells 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 spanning the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Nor are Marxists and feminists the only groups to make use of ideological critique. Such critique is used by virtually all groups that find themselves marginalized, oppressed, misrepresented, or “unheard” by society at large – by African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, gays and lesbians, Chicanos, 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 in Action

Among the liveliest critical movements today are carried 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 by those in power for the purposes of sustaining their position and privilege. Such attention is particularly useful in matters of law, where court rulings often seem to favour “the haves” as opposed to minorities. For example, in matters of hate speech, court rulings often favor 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.

While the critical race movement often focuses on people oppressed by a particular racial category, 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 are among the most obvious cases. In all these cases the colonialists discredited those whom they invaded, exploited, and dominated. Colonialists imposed their laws, religions, educational systems and cultural habits so as to “improve” the subjugated. But cultural
invasion is now subtler, for example, taking the form of tourism (“look at their quaint ways”) and global business expansion (“they can work for us”). As the prominent scholar Edward Said also proposed, even in the way we study other cultures, we create stereotypes that are distancing or demeaning.\textsuperscript{3} Our research accounts tend to romanticize non-Western culture (“the beauty of the native rituals”), demean it (“they prohibit education for females”), or demonize it (“they are terrorists”). In studying the other, we create them in terms of our own values.

Nor is it an easy matter for the targets of such criticism to defend themselves. Their defense of what appears to be a self-serving statement will only give rise to new suspicion. They can’t defend themselves with “the facts” because the statement of the facts is also loaded in their favor. And, because ideological critique is typically directed against those in power – who have wealth, position, privilege, security, and the like – their defenses seem especially 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 equality because everyone is subject to such critique, and everyone has a right to a voice. No one can be pushed out of the conversation because others lay claim to the real Truth. Let’s turn to a second major line of postmodern argument.

The Literary Assault: What Textual Tradition is This?

A second slide into skepticism began quietly in a small corner of the scholarly world; but 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 \textit{A Course in General Linguistics}\textsuperscript{4} Saussure laid out the rationale for what became the discipline of \textit{semiotics}, that is, a science focused on the systems by which we communicate. Two of his ideas are particularly important to our discussion. First, a distinction is made between the \textit{signifier} and the \textit{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, \textit{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. On a simple level, your parents could have given you another name; more interestingly, we could also have called the “force of gravity” the “hand of God”.

\begin{itemize}
\end{itemize}
Saussure’s second significant proposal was that sign systems are governed by their own internal logics. Put simply, languages have rules of usage, such as rules of grammar or syntax. When we speak or write we must approximate these rules (or internal logics); otherwise we will 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.

**Truth as Style**

A lively illustration of the extent to which “truth in language” depends on social convention is given in Raymond Queneau’s little volume *Exercises in Style.* 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, all of which try to “tell the truth” about what happened. Here is 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.

In a bleak, urban desert, I saw it again the self-same day, drinking the cup of humiliation offered by a lowly button. (1981, 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. (1981, 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, interpolated 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 “obscure”? 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 also thrust reason itself into question. Reason
has long been prized in Western culture. From Descartes to the present, it is per-
haps the chief virtue of the modernist world-view. As we are led 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. Derrida’s writings, often identified as
deconstructionist, are highly ambiguous and open to many interpretations. From
one perspective, however, they significantly undermine the cultural investment
in human reason. Consider two major premises. First, suggests Derrida, rational
arguments bring about a massive suppression of meaning. Or to put it another way,
when we are convinced by a rational argument we do not know more, but less.
Second, if closely examined, all rational arguments will collapse. Rationality,
then, is not a foundation for anything — for our institutions of government and sci-
ence, for example, or for 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? Like many others, Derrida first views language as a system of differences,
a system in which each word is distinct from all others. Simply put, language is
made of separate words, each distinct from all others. A formal way of talking

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 differentiating 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. However, there in the background, possibly out of consciousness, are the 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’s put this argument into action: consider the widely accepted scientific view 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, chemical 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 much that 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 distinguish 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 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 existence 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, for example, we generally prize the rational over the emotional, mind over body, order over disorder, and leaders over followers. As many critics point 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 strive to upset the binaries and blur the boundaries.
Now let’s turn to the second proposal: when rational arguments are placed under close scrutiny, they fall 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*. In the first case, a word gains its meaning by virtue of differing from other words. We just discussed this in terms of binaries. In effect, a word like “bat” has no meaning in itself, but only when contrasted with other terms, such as “hat” or “mat”. However, these contrasts are insufficient to give “bat” its full meaning. Rather, the word “bat” is empty in itself; simply a syllable. In order to understand the term we need a definition. That is, we must defer to other terms that will tell us what “but” means. So, we see that bat can be defined variously as “an implement for hitting a baseball”, “to hit at something”, “to smack”, “a flying mammal”…. Now we face a problem. What is the meaning of the terms in these definitions, words such as “implement”, “smack” or “mammal”? Yes, they differ from other words, but in locating their meaning we must defer to yet other words. To put it another way, every entry in the dictionary is defined in terms of other words, and thus, each word defers its meaning until you read its definition. But now you have entered a dark tunnel of ignorance. No words have meaning in themselves, and their true meaning can never be discovered. 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 this circle of mutual definition?

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”. And the definition of these terms depends, in turn, on other words, and so on. To gain clarity, let’s say you define democracy in terms of “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*.

To summarize, whatever is put forth as a rational argument is both suppressive, in a certain sense, and when its terms are closely examined, we cannot determine what they mean. One might say that rational argument silences all other voices, including the opposition whose existence is essential to its sense. Even if an argument is asserted with gusto, it still 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 doesn’t 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: Which Club is Speaking?

The two critical movements just discussed – the one pointing to the values implicit in all accounts of the world, and the other to the way in which our language controls the sense we make of things – 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 the major proposals of the first two movements. Consider: many people consider science to be the crowning jewel of Western civilization. To replace the chaos of mere opinions, scientists have the hard facts; to replace armchair speculation, 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, criminal investigation, military planning, and more. Unlike all other claims to 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 an opinion. The privilege of royalty and religion 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. Good ideas, for sure. 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 the scientist’s are moved to silence. Are we witnessing here the emergence of a new breed of high priests, a subtle dictatorship whose powers are beyond our even questioning?

This new and unassailable hierarchy spurs many scholars to open scientific knowledge to critical analysis. The point of the analysis is not to undermine scientific efforts, but to remove their authority and to place them into the orbit of everyday scrutiny. The principal constructionist focus 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. When we read news 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. 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 is the common person mystified by scientific language, but also many scientists “believe in” scientific truth. As a result, they are often unable to escape their premises to ask critical questions from alternative standpoints.

Are these issues 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. In psychology, for example, one cannot set out to study “free will” or “the soul” because these simply do not exist in the material world of prediction and control. It is science that has reduced the enormities in human variation to a handful of racial categories, informed society that 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. In contrast, by understanding scientific claims as human constructions, lodged in cultural traditions as opposed to objectively “revealing nature’s secrets”, we open spaces for dialogue in which all people can voice the truths and values of their traditions.

One of the earliest contributions to a constructionist view of scientific knowledge was Karl Mannheim’s groundbreaking volume, *Ideology and Utopia*.\(^7\) One finds four central proposals in the work, the first quite similar to the first two constructionist principles set out above: (1) scientific theories do not spring from observation but from the scientist’s social group, and (2) scientific groups are often organized around certain theories. This leads to the more interesting conclusion that (3) theoretical disagreements are therefore issues of group conflict, and finally to the far-reaching conclusion that (4) what we assume to be scientific knowledge is therefore a by-product of a social process. Closely related was Ludwig Fleck’s 1935 work, *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*.\(^8\) As Fleck proposed, 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* demonstrated ways in which theoretical propositions are “constitutive of the phenomena” in the social sciences. By this he meant that when we single out a phenomenon and define it in a certain way, we create what we take the world to be. This idea later became the basis for labeling theory in sociology. In this case, scholars are concerned with the way in which the labels we give to phenomena come to be self-fulfilling. Thus, when we create a legal code, a police force, courts of law, and prisons, we establish institutions that will necessarily create what we call “criminals”. In the same way, psychiatry creates mental illness, and the medical establishment creates illness. When put in these terms, we can ask whether these are our best options.

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 too 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 objectification and posits the order within which these make sense and within which everyday 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. (1966, 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 the 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.* The title of the work reflected the revolutionary spirit of the time, and became at one point the most widely cited book 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 the continued testing of hypotheses against reality – we come ever closer to the truth. Few would argue, 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 knowledge. 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, a conception of a subject matter, and methodological practices. (You can see the similarity between Kuhn’s idea of a “paradigm” and Wittgenstein’s concept of a “form of life”.) Thus, when scientists approach the world, they do so from within a specific paradigm. Even the most exacting measurements are only sensible from within that 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. Thus, what we call progress in science is not a movement from a less to a more objectively accurate paradigm. It is a shift from one “way of seeing the world” to another. For Kuhn, “the scientist with a new paradigm sees differently from the way he had seen before” (1962, p. 115). No longer was it possible to justify science as a progressive march toward the truth.

Researching the Researcher

These early works on science as social construction gave 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 spent hundreds of hours studying the way scientists in the Jonas Salk laboratories negotiated with each other as to what will count as a “scientific

---

fact” as opposed to “opinion”. Latour and Woolgar were sensitive to the ways a scientist’s commitment to a theory or to a measuring device can influence what counts as good data. They could witness the way in which the availability of grant funds and journal policies influence what is considered important and how the research is described. Historians are also active in exploring the social history of science. For example, the historian Stephen Shapin 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 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? These are today’s socially preferred interpretations, 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 various 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 leads to heart disease”. Within scientific circles such propositions can 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 is 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 practices that support our values, 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 DECONSTRUCTION TO RECONSTRUCTION**

These three intellectual movements – the first illuminating the values inherent in all constructions of reality, the second pointing to the grip of language, and

---


finally, the social basis of scientific knowledge – are all major contributions to contemporary dialogues in social construction. There are many others. Numerous practitioners – in education, therapy, organizational change, social work, and more – have also been active contributors to the constructionist dialogues. Interestingly, 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). As you can see, no one owns constructionist ideas; all are free to participate in the conversations – including you, the reader.

Most importantly, as you can now see more clearly, these various movements – when considered together – pose major challenges to longstanding views of knowledge, truth, objectivity and reason. For many, this new transformation is catastrophic. It represents the erosion of beliefs central to our ways of life, including our investments in truth, individual reason, and the promise of a better future through scientific research. Traditions of democracy, religion, education, and nationhood are all placed under threat. As you can well appreciate, it is just such threats that have stimulated fiery criticism of constructionist ideas. (These will be the subject of Chapter 9.)

Yet, there is a far more positive way to view the situation. First, in the deconstructive challenge to all universal claims to knowledge – in science, religion, government, news reporting, and otherwise – the grounds are removed for any particular group to claim ultimate superiority. This point is especially important in light of the development of globe-spanning technologies of communication and transportation that bring the world’s peoples increasingly into conflict with each other. We are confronting 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. Constructionism invites a certain humility about one’s assumptions and ways of life, fosters curiosity about others’ perspectives and values, and opens the way to replacing the contentious battles over who is right with the mutual probing for possibilities. In these respects, many see a constructionist perspective as essential to the world’s survival.

Yet, while profoundly liberating, there is a second and possibly more important outcome of the constructionist dialogues. This is the possibility for reconstruction. If all that we take to be real, rational, and good issues from social process, then

---

16 An account of the relationship between social construction and Buddhism can be found in Gergen, K.J. and Hoskins, D.M. (2006) If you meet social construction along the road: A dialogue with Buddhism. In M. Kwee, K.J. Gergen and F. Koshikawa (Eds.), *Horizons in Buddhist Psychology*. Chagrin Falls, OH: Taos Institute Publications.
we have enormous potential for creating new worlds together. We can co-create new ways of understanding, new traditions of relating, and new forms of life. 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. 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.

And, I must finally and importantly add: *constructionist ideas are not candidates for “the new truth”*. Nor is constructionism a belief system that one must embrace or not, depending on its possible truth. All the proposals outlined above are constructions. The main question to be asked of constructionist ideas is about their utility. What kind of world do we create when we use these ideas? The following section will clarify.

**REFLECTIVE PRAGMATISM: THE WORKING VOCABULARIES OF THE WORLD**

It is useful here to summarize this chapter in a way that prepares you for the remainder of this book. In the broadest sense, I have tried to develop a way of approaching all claims to knowledge, whether scientific, moral, religious, political… or in our daily life. All are communal constructions, born within relations, saturated with values, and useful in some way for those who share them. This orientation may be described as a *meta-perspective*, as it applies to all claims to knowledge, reason, or right. It may be helpful here to picture social construction as an umbrella under which all traditions of sense making can be placed. Beneath the umbrella we can locate all social traditions, their shared understandings, and their allied ways of life. Thus, under the umbrella we find all the sciences – physics, chemistry, biology, astronomy – and indeed all the subject matters you find at most universities (for example, history, philosophy, sociology, economics, mathematics). As well, we can include all religions, governments, commercial organizations, sporting traditions, and so on. We can approach all these ways of life as emerging from a process of socially constructing meaning. Here we might call these constructions *working vocabularies*. Thus, the working vocabulary of a psychotherapist might include words such as “feeling” and “hoping”, while teachers need words like “student” and “thinking”, and bankers need “profit” and “accounts”.

With this orientation in hand, we are invited into two major reflections. First, we may ask, what is achieved by constructing the world in any particular way?
This removes the question of Truth and replaces it with a question of “what are the outcomes”? Essentially, this is a question of pragmatics. What is accomplished, for example, by a community in which the world is constructed in terms of atomic particles, as opposed to neurons, minds, or sacred spirits? Second, the umbrella orientation asks us to reflect on the values implicit or explicit in the various accomplishments. For example, the scientist might wish to predict and control events in the world, the therapist to relieve suffering, the priest to foster compassion, and so on. When we can discern the valued goals of such groups, we can begin to appreciate their potentials. We don’t have to ask which is ultimately true or right. Rather, there are multiple possibilities, and we may find our own traditions lacking what others can offer. At the same time, we can inquire into what traditions or values are silenced, oppressed, or annihilated by a given tradition of construction. This is all the more important because when we are fully immersed in a given tradition or way of life, its constructions are no longer constructions. We often come to see them as true and good, for all times and people. When we take our realities and values as essential and undeniable, we often trample on others’ values and ways of life.

In sum, a social constructionist orientation, at the general level, functions as a reflective pragmatism. It invites us to see the utility in all ways of life, and to be both appreciatively curious and critical. So, then, what is this book about? Here we must now place social constructionist ideas under the umbrella! These ideas now become a working vocabulary. How can we put this vocabulary to work and, most particularly, in the service of reconstruction? How can we use this vocabulary to generate ways of practicing research, developing new ideas, and fostering practices – in education, therapy, organizational change, leadership, daily life, and more?
Constructionism and Constructivism

If you enter the door into constructionist ideas, it won’t be long before you encounter the question, “What is the difference between constructionism and constructivism?” At a basic level, the answer is simple... and interesting. A longstanding philosophical tradition — with roots in Plato, Descartes, and Kant — gives primacy to the individual’s innate capacities for thought. In twentieth-century psychology, one outcome of this tradition was the emergence of constructivism. The movement was enormously important as it challenged the dominant behaviorist view that all behavior is influenced or controlled by environmental inputs — or reinforcement, in behaviorist terms. In contrast, constructivists proposed that our behavior results from our innate mental capacities. In starkest terms, there are no reinforcements in the world until the individual treats them as reinforcing. For example, money is not a reinforcement unless you care about money. Perhaps the central constructivist work is George Kelley’s 1955 book, The Psychology of Personal Constructs.17 As Kelly proposed, we understand the world in terms of mental categories, or construals. This is to say, we construct the world in our own terms. Thus, the idea of constructivism.

You can immediately see why people ask about the difference between constructionism and constructivism. Both challenge the idea that we can know the world for what it is, and argue for the centrality of the constructing process in determining what counts as knowledge. However, you can also appreciate the crucial difference between the approaches as well: where constructivism places the origin of knowledge in the head of the individual, social construction places the origin in social process. Constructivism is fiercely individualist; constructionism champions relationship. One no longer finds many scholars who hold to a radical constructivist view, suggesting that each of us makes up the world on our own. Such a view struggles to explain how we ever come up with our private categories of understanding, or how we could ever communicate if we each had unique systems of understanding. More common is the emergence of social constructivism, holding that we understand the world through mental categories, but we acquire those categories through social relationships.

All this is straightforward enough, except for the fact that in some academic quarters (for example, the social study of science) the term constructivism is synonymous with the idea of social construction as developed in this book. In this case, you simply have to read carefully to appreciate the author’s definition. After all, no one owns the meaning of a word!

THE PRESENT VOLUME

In this chapter I have sketched out a set of proposals that are somewhere toward the center 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.

The chapter has placed many traditional understandings and practices in question. 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 the 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 the remaining chapters we move from these more scholarly concerns to fields of practice. In Chapter 5 the focus is on forms of dialogue for reducing conflict and hostility. Of special concern are practices of transformative dialogue, which are especially useful in their bridging alien constructions of the world. Chapter 6 shifts attention to the field of education. Central here will be ways in which constructionist ideas inform or invite new practices of teaching, learning, and evaluation. In Chapter 7 we explore new directions in the helping professions, most particularly therapy and health care. We turn our attention in Chapter 8 to the organizational world, and the way in which the well-being of the organization and its participants depends centrally on processes of social construction. Here we shall also consider practices of relational leadership.

Throughout these discussions you will certainly have questions – possibly even strong criticisms. You could scarcely grow up in modern society without doubting what will unfold in this book. In the final chapter, 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 if at any point you find yourself resisting.

**REFLECTION**

For over thirty years I have been deeply involved with the development of constructionist ideas. They have affected my relations with academic colleagues and students, therapists, organizational leaders, community builders, health care workers, friends, family, and more. However, in my early 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. As I mentioned earlier, constructionist premises are themselves constructed. Social construction is not, then, a candidate for the truth, but an available resource. The constructionist dialogues are invitations to a way of understanding. As constructionist ideas enter our ways of talking, they may give us new options. The major question from a constructionist perspective is “what happens to our lives together” when we understand ourselves as constructing our worlds? Yes, reflective critique is invited; 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 an 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 and more promising ways of being. This idea injects a shot of energy into many of my conversations.

FURTHER RESOURCES

On Social Construction

Crisis in Value Neutrality

Literary Theory and Deconstruction

The Social Construction of Science

Media Resources
Gergen introductory lecture on social construction: www.youtube.com/watch?v=-AsFFX9Ib0