

Chapter 1

The Drama of Social Construction

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

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

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

The Basic Idea: We Construct the World

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

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

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

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

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

Different You's from Different Views

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

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

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

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