

COMMUNICATION AND SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION: CLAIMING OUR BIRTHRIGHT

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In conversation with a friend, Jennifer Senior said that her current project was stalled. She described herself as finding all of her ideas stale and as having difficulty summoning the energy to continue working. Her friend replied, “You’re burned out!” As Ms. Senior recounted the conversation, this comment provoked an “ah-HA!” experience that energized her so much that she immediately got back to work...and wrote a well-regarded article about “burn-out.”¹

Her article was featured on National Public Radio’s “Talk of the Nation” program on November 30, 2006. During the interview, Senior noted that “burn-out” is not yet a category of mental illness in the DSM, but hoped that it soon would be.² Other participants in the discussion enriched the concept of being “burned-out” by distinguishing between being “burned-out” and “worn-out” and by constructing a story about high stress jobs that do and do not restore the energy expended to perform them.

Neither panelists nor listeners who called into the program raised the question of whether burn-out was found or whether it was made. That is, was burn-out something that was already there, awaiting a Columbus-like discovery in which copyright substituted for planting the Spanish flag backed by sword and cannon? Or was burn-out fabricated in the to-and-fro process in which it was named, defined, qualified, and embedded in other stories?

Whether found or made, once “burn-out” enters into our discourse, it will be treated as “real” and thus will be real in its consequences. Depending on how it is placed within our society’s stories, to say “I’m burned out” will elicit certain responses – perhaps sympathy, criticism, advice or medication. In medical discourse, it can be used as a diagnosis (“she is burned out; let’s prescribe a sedative”); in legal discourse, it can be used as a mitigating factor (“yes, she failed to honor the contract, but she was burned out”); and in the discourse of social science, it can be used as a variable that causes or is caused by other variables (“if burn-out increases among the workforce, then absenteeism increases proportionately”).

Those who take a social construction perspective, however, think that it matters whether something like “burn-out” is made or found. If burn-out, or any of the other events and objects of our social world, pre-exist our finding them, then it is very

¹ Jennifer Senior (2006). Can’t get no satisfaction: In a culture where work can be a religion, burnout is its crisis of faith. *New York Magazine*, December 4, 2006. Retrieved on December 1, 2006, from <http://nymag.com/news/features/24757/>.

² The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*. This is the official description of conditions recognized by the American Psychological Association

important for us to name and describe them accurately. Our responsibility is to get it right. However, if burn-out and other events and objects are made, then more complex responses are possible.

Our capacity for wonder is enhanced if we see the events and objects of our social world as made. Several years ago, Kim and I flew over an active volcano on the island of Hawaii, watching the lava flow hit the sea. We felt a sense of awe, knowing that the billows of steam thrown up by the flow of molten rock into the sea were creating new land. We knew that when our plane touched down, the island would be bigger than when we took off. I had a similar feeling of awe listening to the “Talk of the Nation” program. As I listened, the ways that my culture provides me for feeling bad was being increased! This new thing called “burn-out” was being socially constructed right there, in front of my listening ears!

Our ability to critique aspects of the social world is enhanced by taking a social construction perspective. The conversation between Jennifer Senior and her friend did not have to involve “burn-out,” and if it did, Senior could have responded in any of a thousand ways other than writing an essay in the *New York Magazine*. If “made,” then “burn-out” is contingent. The conversation might have made something else. What would have happened if the friend had offered any of a number of alternative stories for Senior’s experience? For example, she might have said that Senior was lazy and just needed to apply herself harder. She might have offered the diagnosis that she was possessed by evil spirits; she might have suggested that God, her body, or the universe was telling her to do a different project; or she might have recommended one of the Boomer self-applied remedies of meditating, doing yoga, joining an aerobics class, falling in love, etc. That is to say, the social creation of “burn-out” wasn’t a “necessary” result of this conversation; it could have resulted in something different. Equipped with proper heuristics, we can describe and critique how just this improbable result occurred.

Further, if “burn-out” is socially constructed, we can call into question its use in, e.g., medical, legal, and scientific discourses. Those who incorporate it into the discourses of law, medicine and management become participants in the process by which it is made real and share the moral responsibility for using it in ways that suppress or support personal and social functions. We can ask questions about how “burn-out” and all the other conditions in the DSM support the healthcare industry, how they enable or disable us to deal with challenging times, etc.

Taking a social construction approach also makes things like “burn-out” seem fluid and plastic. There was a time when they were not, and will be a time in which they are not. Between these parameters, they are contingent on how people act. In this way, the social construction approach positions us to make practical judgments about whether, when, and how we might act to preclude burn-out, or to intervene in its enactment so that something else can emerge.

TAKING A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION APPROACH

My purpose in this chapter is to provide a gentle introduction to the boisterous paradigm of scholars and practitioners who take the social construction approach. The common thread in this paradigm is the idea that reality itself, or at least our knowledge of it, is, wholly or in part, the product of our own actions. The phrases set off by commas in the preceding sentence mark sites of disagreement among those taking this approach and

account for most of the different flavors within the paradigm. The main stem of the sentence grounds a perspective that sees the events and objects of our social worlds as fabricated, us as complicit in their fabrication, and us as the beneficiaries and/or victims of the things we and others have made. In this paradigm, epistemology (what do we know?) is thoroughly penetrated by ethics (what did/should we do?).

Many people who feel an affinity for this paradigm are not confident that they “know” what it is all about. They have good reasons for uncertainty.

The social construction approach differs more radically from other paradigms than it might appear. It isn't that other paradigms say “yes” and we say “no;” it is more that they say “yes” and we say “blue.” For example, a social construction approach does not produce “theory,” at least in the conventional sense of a series of propositions describing some portion of the social world, such as professional “burn-out.” Some of those taking this approach have coined the term “practical theory” as a better description of what we are about.³ In this sense, “theory” consists of a set of heuristics (language, models, concepts, questions, etc.) inviting us to look at some portion of the social world in a particular way. Our curiosity about “burn-out,” for example, would not be satisfied by a list of its attributes as much as it would be by a description of how, in the to-and-fro interactions of real people in real situations, it is made and of the consequences of having made “burn-out” rather than any of the many other things that we could have made in that moment.

In addition to paradigmatic incommensurability, “social construction” has only recently (but not for the first time) become a fully-vested voice in scholarly conversations; it does not have an institutional home (we can't refer to, e.g., the Chicago, Birmingham, or Frankfurt “school of social construction”); and it is misnamed (the most frequently used label, “social constructionism,” refers to work in a single discipline, social psychology, although the paradigm itself is delightfully multidisciplinary).

A better person might have been content to write an “introduction,” but I have succumbed to the temptation to construct an argument even if mostly between the lines. The sirens that I find irresistible are voices in a long but often-unacknowledged history of ideas that are poetically renewed in the contemporary moment as “social construction.” The subtitle of this chapter, “Claiming our Birthright,” summarizes my contention that communication is, has always been, and should be central in the work of the community that takes a social construction approach.

TWO NARRATIVES OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

Let's assume that “social construction” is, like everything else, socially constructed. That is, our knowledge even of ourselves takes the form of stories and that these stories bear the imprint of the language in which they are told and of the histories/biases/abilities/rhetorical choices of the persons who tell them. There are two stories of social construction, one clearly better than the other.

³ For a discussion of these two quite different notions of “theory,” see Stephen W. Littlejohn and Karen Foss (2005), *Theories of Human Communication*. Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 8th edition, pp, 23-29. To make things even more confusing, there are two not-quite-the-same versions of “practical theory.” See Vernon E. Cronen (2001). Practical theory, practical art, and the pragmatic-systemic account of inquiry. *Communication Theory*, 11 (1): 14-35; and Robert T. Craig (1999). Communication theory as a field. *Communication Theory* 9 (2), 119-161.

AGAINST DESCARTES: THE USUAL STORY

The most common story told by social constructionists begins with the Enlightenment. For reasons usually not included in this narrative,⁴ Descartes (the villain) introduced a way of thinking that defined individuals as autonomous, knowledge as the affirmation of undoubtable propositions (*cogito ergo sum*), the world as dualistic (separating cognitions within our heads from the events and objects of the outside world), and nature as objects interacting with each other on the basis of laws.

As social constructionists themselves would quickly admit, selecting Descartes as the starting point is a narrative choice that has important implications, and the story itself has elements provided by the narrator's knowledge of subsequent developments, such as the physics of Isaac Newton, the positivism of Auguste Comte, and the philosophy of the Vienna Circle.

This story presents social constructionists (the heroes of the story, of course) as having identified the limitations and unanticipated consequences of the Enlightenment and as setting out a preferable alternative. In pointed contrast to the Enlightenment, this alternative depicts individuals as constructed in on-going processes of social interaction, knowledge as the affirmation of historically and contextually-situated claims, the world – or at least our knowledge of it – as fundamentally linguistic, and things-in-themselves as outside our ken. The result is a paradigm “marked by a far greater charity toward disparate voices, sharpened by a sensitivity to the process by which knowledge claims are made and justified, with a heightened moral concern, and a keener appreciation of the communal nature of understanding.”⁵

RENEWING A NEGLECTED VOICE IN WESTERN INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

There is a less-often told but better story. It starts in the pre-Socratic period in Greece (also an arbitrary and consequential choice) and highlights the tensions between the sophists (including Gorgias, of whom more will be said below) and Plato. Among the positions taken by the sophists⁶ were the notions that the world is either in a state of constant flux or at least capable of many descriptions (the modern term is polysemy), that knowledge is contextual (“man is the measure of all things”), and that the use of language is constitutive, not just representational (language both reveals and conceals).

In this story, there has been a continuing conversation among these positions in which the Cartesian/positivistic voice is just one among many in the shadow of Plato, and it is balanced by a rich and diverse heritage of voices that have taken up themes from the sophists. In this story, current ideas about social construction are not so much “new” as newly empowered, poetically renewed voices that have been important parts of the Western intellectual tradition from its inception.

The “dramatic complication” in this story is that the Cartesian/positivistic voice enforced a social amnesia by claiming that it was the only true path to knowledge. Some of the shrillness among contemporary social constructionists, so this story asserts, is a

⁴ Descartes “method” was intended as a way to end the interminable conflict between Catholics and Protestants that wrapped Europe in devastating war. See chapters 1 and 2 of Toulmin, Stephen (1990), *Cosmopolis: The hidden agenda of modernity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

⁵ John Shotter and Ken Gergen (1989). Preface and Introduction. In Shotter, J. & Gergen, K. (Eds.). *Texts of identity*. London: Sage Publications, p. x.

⁶ I'm trying to write this in a manner that acknowledges that they were a heterogeneous, playful lot who, for principled reasons, did not attempt to construct a systematic philosophy.

result of having to shout so loud to be heard, or to fight so hard for legitimacy against the linguistic tyranny of the positivists.⁷

DISTINGUISHING FEATURES OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

The academic community expects its members to be able to describe the paradigm in which they work. Social constructionists often violate these expectations. Our paradigm is not constituted by a set of propositions to be affirmed so much as it is by an orientation, a set of practices, or a set of themes. We are more likely to give a demonstration or an example than a presentation or exposition. But when pressed to speak to incommensurate paradigms, we try to do the best we can. In this section, I use four strategies to set out the distinguishing features of the social construction paradigm: contrast with “communication science,” statements of shared commitments; critique of central features of another paradigm; and a flight of artistic imagination.

CONTRAST WITH “COMMUNICATION SCIENCE”

Social constructionism is distinguished from other paradigms both by what it says about things and by the things about which it has something to say. In comparison to what Berger and Chaffee called “communication science,”⁸ the things about which social constructionism has something to say are fluid, processual, polysemic, and insubstantial.⁹ And if this is what we are interested in, it shouldn’t surprise us that those in the communication science paradigm think that we and our work are trivial, frivolous, ridiculous, and/or dangerous.¹⁰

Social constructionists are often asked to sit down, get serious, and tell the other members of the scholarly community what we are up to. When issued by those in the “communication science” tradition, the invitation is correctly heard as a request for a series of propositions that name the events and objects within the domain of the theory, ascribe attributes to them, and measure relationships among them.¹¹ When social constructionists try to respond to this invitation, however, we almost always wind up stammering and stuttering and sounding quite silly, because social construction

⁷ For a somewhat fuller telling of this story, see W. Barnett Pearce and Karen Foss (1990), “The Historical Context of Communication as a Science,” pp. 1-19 in Gordon L. Dahnke and Glen Clatterbuck (Eds.), *Human Communication: Theory and Research*. San Francisco: Wadsworth.

⁸ Charles R. Berger and Steven Chaffee (1987). The study of communication as science. Pp. 15-19 in Berger, C. R. & Chaffee, S. H., Eds., *Handbook of communication science*. Newbury Park, CA, Sage. I’m using “communication science” as the “other” participant in this conversation among paradigms because that was my own life experience. One could trace out somewhat different conversations between social constructionism and other paradigms, for example critical and cultural studies, as did Victoria Chen (2004), The possibility of critical dialogue in the theory of CMM, *Human Systems*, 15: 179-192.

⁹ As an example of the “scientific” paradigm’s willingness to banish that which does not fit its high/rigid standards: in at least one edition of his influential *Foundations of Behavioral Research*, Fred Kerlinger dismissed research about the effects of the “style” of teachers because, as I remember the phrase from a long-lost book, “style” is “too fluid a thing to be studied scientifically.” Kerlinger noted that a given teacher’s style might vary from class to class and in interaction with different students, thus rendering style as too unstable to be treated as a variable in a well-executed research project.

¹⁰ I was dismayed by how easily I could recall the hurtful, insulting terms in this sentence. In my memory, each has a face (usually florid) and voice (usually raised). I suspect that others could supply additional terms of disparagement.

¹¹ The invitation differs when issued by those who take other approaches to communication. For example, critical theorists fault us for not privileging “power.” Etc.

approaches are not just different in *content* to what “communication scientists” are trying to construct; they are different in *purpose, method, and structure of argument*.

We are not, for example, trying to develop propositions that will function as “covering laws” and that describe law-like relations among operationally-defined and reliably-measured variables. Further, we tend to use abductive reasoning rather than inductive or deductive.¹² The goal of our work is not “theory” or “knowledge” as defined by “communication science” but phronesis, practical theory or practical wisdom. Gobbledygook results when research from a social construction approach is fitted into the mold of scientific theory and argument.

SHARED COMMITMENTS OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISTS

The virtues of this paradigm are its energy, creativity and diversity, not consistency. We think we know something about an on-going, malleable process of which we are participants as well as observers. So it is no wonder that our common language has fuzzy edges and evolves both quickly and unevenly. As Mary and Ken Gergen put it,

Contemporary constructionism has multiple roots. They grow from a variety of different dialogues that span the humanities and the sciences. In this sense, social constructionism is not a singular and unified position. Rather, it is better seen as an unfolding dialogue among participants who vary considerably in their logics, values, and visions. To be sure, there is substantial sharing, but there is no single slate of assumptions to which all would adhere. And the dialogues remain in motion. To articulate a final truth, a foundational logic, or a code of values would indeed be antithetical to the flow of the dialogue itself.¹³

That having been said, the Gergens think it possible to identify three “major lines of argument central to a constructionist sensibility.”¹⁴

- *The communal origins of knowledge.* This stands in contrast both to the notion of possessive individualism (that is, that “I” am the independent owner of my own knowledge) and to the idea of a single, objective Truth independent of human agency.
- *The centrality of language.* Wittgenstein’s notion of language games is one way of expressing the insight that what we take as true, good, or problematic is framed by the language we use to express it. Among other things, this has brought a renewed emphasis on rhetoric and its relationship to knowledge and community.
- *The ideological saturation of knowledge.* Aware that knowledge is communally and linguistically produced, social constructionists question the right of any particular group, including researchers or scholars, to claim ultimate authority about what we know. Even “objective descriptions” of the world are politically and morally saturated. “If communities create realities (facts and good reasons) congenial to their own traditions, and these realities are established as true and good for all, then alternative traditions will be obliterated, and the people who

¹² See Douglas Walton (2004). *Abductive reasoning*. Tuscaloosa, Alabama: University of Alabama Press.

¹³ Mary Gergen and Kenneth J. Gergen, (2003). *Social Constructionism: A Reader*. London: Sage Publications, p. 2.

¹⁴ Mary Gergen and Kenneth Gergen (2003). *Social Construction: A Reader*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 2-5.

represent these traditions will be devalued. Thus, all statements of scientific fact, canons of logic, foundations of law, or spiritual truths will either explicitly or implicitly favor certain ways of life over others. ...Merely entering the paradigm and moving within the tradition is deeply injurious to those people classified as inferior by its standards. In effect, the longstanding distinction between *facts* and *value* – objective reflections of the work, and subjective desires or feelings of ‘ought’ – cannot be sustained.”¹⁵

Undertaking a parallel task of providing an overview of the field, Vivien Burr cautioned that "There is no one feature which could be said to identify a social constructionist position. Instead, we might loosely group as social constructionist any approach which has as its foundation one or more of the following key assumptions:"

- *A critical stance toward taken-for-granted knowledge.* It invites us to be critical of the idea that our observations of the world unproblematically yield its nature to us, to challenge the view that conventional knowledge is based upon objective, unbiased observation of the world.
- *Historical and cultural specificity.* All ways of understanding are historically and culturally relative...products of that culture and are dependent upon the particular social and economic arrangements prevailing in that time.
- *Knowledge is sustained by social processes.* It is through daily interactions between people in the course of social life that our versions of knowledge become fabricated.
- *Knowledge and social action go together.* Descriptions or constructions of the world therefore sustain some patterns of social action and exclude others. Our constructions of the world are therefore bound up with power relationships because they have implications for what it is permissible for different people to do, and for how they may treat others.¹⁶

Several of the sub-groups in the Summer Institute co-sponsored by the NCA and the Crooked Timbers group¹⁷ developed summary statements of their concepts of a social construction approach to communication, or a communication approach to social construction. One such group specified these as useful summary statements:

- Communication makes us human.
- We exist in communication.
- Diverse realities exist simultaneously.
- Realities are created in communication and inform the character of the process.
- Power is the social construction of affordances and constraints.
- Every action is an intervention.
- Our aim is to enrich what makes us human and to transform the practices that impede the full expression of everyone's humanity.¹⁸

¹⁵ Mary Gergen and Kenneth J. Gergen (2003). *Social Constructionism: A Reader*, p. 5.

¹⁶ Vivien Burr (1995). *Introduction to Social Constructionism*. London: Routledge, pp. 2-5.

¹⁷ Shawn Spano, Karen A. Foss, Kris Kirschbaum, and Stephen W. Littlejohn, "Creating opportunities for social construction: The Albuquerque Summer Institute," this volume.

¹⁸ Bill Eadie (2006). *Social Construction in Groups: "Outside" and "Inside" Perspectives*. Paper presented to the National Communication Association, San Antonio, Texas. Emphases in the original.

CRITIQUE OF CENTRAL FEATURES OF OTHER PARADIGMS

One way of defining something is to identify its opposite or alternative. This is a particularly attractive procedure when one feels that “the other” has been the dominant voice. Critiques of selected aspects of the dominant paradigm are a rhetorically effective way of creating space for the articulation of one’s own point of view.

One of the leading figures in what has come to be called symbolic interactionism, Herbert Blumer wrote two powerful essays that critique what he called “empirical science.” One criticized the then-dominant notion of theory,¹⁹ the other the concept of the variable.²⁰ Both made the point that the world is far too ambiguous and the process of knowing far too reflexively convoluted to have either theoretical concepts or operationally defined variables that serve us well.

Ken Gergen scandalized social psychologists by writing an essay that showed that their knowledge-claims should be understood as historical artifacts rather than timeless truths.²¹ He followed this essay with another that called his colleagues to perceive theory as generating insights, making certain forms of action possible, and either reconstructing or redistributing power rather than intellectually and politically neutral representations of states of affairs. As such, by the nature of their business, theorists are necessarily involved in moral/political questions and engaged with (or against) the interests of those they are studying or describing. The image of the isolated “ivory tower” of detached academic endeavor, he argued, is an untenable misperception of the process of research and theory-building.²²

A FLIGHT OF ARTISTIC IMAGINATION

Join me in an imaginative romp; read this section seriously but with a playful spirit.

The *Encyclopedia Britannica* tells us that all of the major philosophers of Hellenistic culture are portrayed in Raphael’s “The School of Athens.”²³

---Place reproduction of whole painting near here---

The two central figures, Plato and Aristotle, are engaged in intense conversation. Each is gesturing in a manner indicative of his philosophy (this can be seen more clearly in the enlargement of the central focus of the painting). Plato points upward, to the realm of

---Place reproduction of the blow-up of the center of the painting near here---
ideas in which truth is obtained through philosophic insight and where reality is eternal, unchanging, and immutable. Aristotle points outward, at the world of politics, public speaking and household management,²⁴ where knowledge comes from observation, categorization, and experience.

¹⁹ Herbert Blumer (1954). "What is Wrong with Social Theory." *American Sociological Review* 18: 3-10.

²⁰ Herbert Blumer (1956). "Sociological Analysis and the "Variable." *American Sociological Review* 21: 683-690.

²¹ Gergen, K.J. (1973) Social psychology as history. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 26, 309-320.

²² Kenneth J. Gergen (1978), Toward generative theory. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 36: 1344-1360.

²³ The painting was done in 1509-1510. For an interactive identification of these philosophers, see http://un2sg4.unige.ch/athena/raphael/raf_ath4.html. Retrieved on February 2, 2006.

²⁴ These are the examples Aristotle gave of things in the domain of *praxis*. In this domain, things are contingent and knowledge takes the form of *phronesis*, or practical wisdom. But even in the domain of

What would be gained if someone taking a social construction perspective were added to the painting? Let's call her Mara, and let's paint her walking between Plato and Aristotle and included in their conversation. What gesture would represent her social constructionist approach?

Perhaps she might make two gestures – creating a problem for the painter! One gesture might be a circling motion with her finger that we might interpret as saying “look at the three of us in this conversation; look at what we are doing and what effects it has!” The second gesture might use both arms; an inclusive embrace of everyone in the room. We might interpret this gesture as saying “look at all of us; see what we've made! We're a 'school!'” Both gestures are self-referential, including herself and her companions rather than pointing upward or outward.

If we could add sound as well as movement to the painting – easy enough to do in this era of hypertext and cyberspace -- we might hear her tell Plato and Aristotle that by pointing upward and outward, they are ignoring the most immediate and relevant thing: the conversation in which they are engaged. This conversation isn't just “about” things up there or out there, it is itself a material substance. Is it a debate? A deliberation? A dialogue? An argument? Are their minds opening or closing as the series of turns continues? We see them speaking and gesturing, but who is listening? And how are they listening? Are they temporarily silent just to find the flaw in the other's argument or is their silence an invitation to the other to express himself and be understood?

But forget what is being pointed at, she urges. Think, rather, about what you are doing by pointing. These are not just gestures; they are moves in a language game and these moves have consequences. By pointing at just that moment in the conversation, Mara tells them, you are making things in the conversation. Among other things, you are making yourselves as people, your relationship (it might be redefined, perhaps improved or threatened), and the event itself. Mara calls their attention to the way their students are listening and watching their conversation, and suggests that whatever sense they make of the conversation among these intellectual giants will determine the way they relate to persons from other schools. She notes that some folks over in the corner are themselves pointing in various directions, perhaps in imitation of their teachers.

In a fit of boldness, Mara claims that what Plato and Aristotle “know” is shaped by the manner in which they speak of it. She notes that they describe some people and objects as agents who act intentionally and others as helpless victims or inanimate objects that are acted upon. The language that they use separates people according to criteria that are not politically or socially neutral. For example, they differentiate between Greek and non-Greek, but not among the various forms of non-Greek barbarians. These discursive patterns, she says, already constitute philosophical positions. However you use language, she tells them, it creates the perceptions that you will then cite as evidence for the philosophic positions that justify the way you use language. Pay attention to what you are doing when you name things, she urges, and to the nature of the language games you play when talking “philosophy.” Your philosophy, she irreverently tells Plato, is done within the grammar of the verb “to be.” When you ask, “What are truth, beauty, and goodness?” you've already prefigured what you will hear as a good answer – and, because he answered in stories rather than definitions, you didn't give a good hearing to

theoria, where things “have to be what they are,” observation and classification are the modes of epistemology. See *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book VI.

Protagoras when the two of you stayed up all night talking philosophy.²⁵ There are other language games, played within the grammar of other verbs that support different forms of conversations and different answers, she insists.

As she moves to her second, more inclusive gesture, she asks about the nature of this place. What is the consequence of calling it a “school” rather than any of the hundreds of other things that it might be called? Calling it this, rather than a hospice, a hospital, or a home, who is excluded? Who decided, and by what process and with what consequences, that, for example, Gorgias of Leontini should be excluded? Would it still be a “school” if Gorgias was present? And where are all the women? Moving from what is painted to the painting itself, she asks, what is being made by putting this painting of a “gentlemen’s philosophy club” as a fresco on the wall of the Vatican? Does this reproduce a pattern of gender-based discrimination? What other categories of persons are excluded?

I’m confident that Aristotle and Plato would find tiresome these questions from a social construction perspective. But social constructionists believe that important things happen in the give-and-take between real people whether these occur in my house, the Courthouse, or the White House; and that the language we use and the form of communication we are in – debates, dialogue, discussion, arguments, etc. -- have consequences.

Look again at the painting of the School of Athens. Notice the unkempt figure sprawled on the steps in front of Plato and Aristotle. According to the art historians, that figure represents Diogenes.

Should he be included in the “School of Athens”? How do we decide whether he is a great philosopher to whom Plato and Aristotle should listen respectfully, or just another homeless person muttering nonsense, to whom Plato and Aristotle might give a few dollars as charity? That’s not an idle question; social constructionists are interested in the processes by which Diogenes and other disorderly persons are constructed either as great philosophers (and invited to schools) or constructed as crazy persons (and confined to other sorts of institutions). Are we sufficiently comfortable with this process that we believe we know what we are doing and are willing to live with the results?

And notice that the painting includes some scholars who are not affiliated with Athens (despite the title) and does not include all Athenians that some of us might consider noteworthy. One of the excluded persons was Gorgias of Leontini.

Gorgias is best known for a book titled *On the Nonexistent* that doesn’t exist anymore.²⁶ References to it in other books say that Gorgias said:

Nothing exists.

If anything did exist, we would be unable to know it.

If we could know anything, we would not be able to communicate it.²⁷

If read literally, these statements are absurd. But sophists like Gorgias reveled in wordplay, paradoxes and other verbal slights of hand. I suspect Gorgias would be disappointed and bored if he were taken literally, and would not respect those who read

²⁵ Mara has just read chapter 3, “A philosopher encounters a humanist,” pp. 83-122 in Levine, Peter (1998). *Living without philosophy: On narrative, rhetoric, and morality*. Albany: SUNY Press.

²⁶ Did I mention that social constructionists have an affinity for self-reflexive paradoxes?

²⁷ Retrieved from http://www.missouri.edu/~engjnc/rhetoric/gorgias_bib.html on February 2, 2006.

him at such a surface level. But if not a literal meaning, what was Gorgias intending to do in such an absurd series of propositions?

Let's entertain the possibility that there is an intentional and non-literal relationship between the function and the content of each statement. According to Plato, Gorgias and Socrates were intellectual sparring partners. We know what Socrates thought of Gorgias, but we don't have an equivalent document showing how Gorgias thought about their discussions. And we are not likely to, because the difference between Socrates and Gorgias had to do with what knowing looked like, not just the content of knowledge. Socrates worked within the grammar of the verb "to be" and sought propositions that would define the "real" meaning of such things as truth, beauty and goodness, and had someone to write them down so that subsequent generations could pore over them. Gorgias, on the other hand, worked within the narrative structure of stories, and thought that truth, beauty, and goodness were relative things, and was content to make a beautiful, compelling speech, which vanished as soon as the memories of those who heard it were gone.

But perhaps Gorgias' seemingly-absurd comments quoted above are in fact a subtle critique of Plato. Note the sequence: ontology, epistemology, and then communication. The first statement is ontological, dealing with what "exists." The second is epistemological, dealing with how we know. And the third has to do with communication – what we actually say and do with each other. If we pay no attention to the content of the statements, the sequence parallels Plato's philosophic method. Plato began with ontology (his belief that reality was eternal and immutable), then moved to epistemology (dealing with the problem of how we could know such a reality), and finally turned to communication itself (insight through dialectic for those who were able, rhetoric for the masses to persuade them to do the right thing when truth is insufficient to persuade).

Perhaps Gorgias was making the ironic argument that this sequence itself was nonsensical. Mara might join Gorgias in asking Plato where he got that bold and counter-intuitive ontological idea that reality is and must be eternal and immutable. Specifically, she – and Gorgias – might ask how Plato or anyone else can know what "is" before you've worked through your epistemology? To make the point, Gorgias makes an equally arbitrary claim that "nothing exists."

Epistemology was Plato's second step, and Mara might join Gorgias in asking Plato how someone can "know" anything before they engage in communication. Why did Plato continue to look through communication to what it ostensibly revealed (the Forms behind the flux of experience) rather than at communication itself as a material and consequential part of the social world? Again, Gorgias exposes the foolishness of making epistemological claims that are not grounded in communication by declaring "If it did, we couldn't know it."

In this reading, Gorgias' statements that "nothing exists" and "we can't know it" can be heard ironically rather than prosaic assertions of truth. To the extent that they describe anything, it is the absurd consequences of following the sequence of reasoning – first ontology, then epistemology, and finally communication – that Plato used.

If we speculate a bit and assume that Gorgias was suggesting that we proceed in the "opposite" sequence – first communication, then epistemology, and only then finally ontology – we have the structure of a radically different way of engaging the world – one

revoiced in our era as the social construction approach. Gorgias might be saying that “reality” presents itself to us in the experience of being in communication with other people and with the world around us, and any notions we might have about epistemology or reality occur within the framework of that experience. Communication, he might argue, is the primary social process, and its most significant function is that of making the events and objects of our social worlds. Perhaps we can turn Descartes’ famous dictum on its head and say “we communicate, therefore we are.”²⁸

DISTINCTIONS AMONG SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISTS

Although it is possible to identify shared commitments, those who work with this set of ideas are a divergent lot. In fact, those who might recognize each other as working within a similar paradigm have not got to the point where they are organized into identifiable schools or camps. Here is my attempt to identify some of the ways in which they differ.

TAKING MICRO AND MACRO PERSPECTIVES

According to Vivien Burr, there are two broad forms of social constructionist theory and research, which she names as “macro” and “micro” social constructionists.²⁹ “Micro” social constructionists focus on the structures in which language is used in social interaction. They are interested in what particular people say in specific situations, and often look at the turn-by-turn sequence of communicative acts. Examples include ethnomethodology, Conversational Analysis, discursive psychology (Potter), and the coordinated management of meaning (CMM). “Macro” social constructionists pay attention to structures that frame our social and psychological life; they look at “discourses” as wholes and cultural patterns of communication. Examples include the ethnography of communication, Foucauldian criticism, the rhetoric of inquiry, and critical discourse analysis (Fairclough; Wodak).

Burr thinks that finding a way to link micro and macro social constructionism is this community’s the most pressing agenda. She finds a disquieting aspect in each. Macro social constructionism’s preoccupation with power and the coercive aspects of discourse leads logically to “the disappearance of the subject” – persons are seen as hapless victims of larger forces, with little or no ability to act as agents. On the other hand, micro social constructionism celebrates the agency of the individual to create the world in which he or she lives, and leads to the disappearance of power.³⁰ Those who work from this perspective can get caught up in the sense that reality can be just “made up.”³¹

²⁸ I’ve heard both Vern Cronen and Ken Gergen claim this as their original insight. Not able to adjudicate who is right, and not wanting to offend either, I thank both for this way of putting the argument.

²⁹ Vivien Burr (2003). *Social Constructionism*. London: Routledge,. Second edition, p 21.

³⁰ Well, that’s how it appears from the perspective of many of those who take a “macro” perspective. For a thoughtful and data-based examination of this issue, see Victoria Chen (2004), The possibility of critical dialogue in the theory of CMM, *Human Systems*, 15: 179-192.

³¹ The maxim “we can always reconstrue what we cannot deny” is often attributed to psychologist George Kelley, whose work inspired one important branch of constructivism. I’ve been unable to find the citation for the remark, but it clearly indicates an emphasis on individuals’ intrapsychic meanings rather than on the public realm of coordinated action and hegemonic relationships among discourses that social constructionists take seriously.

Their demeanor provides a clue for inferring in which camp particular social constructionists work. Macro social constructionists are, and should be, depressed. They posit that power is ubiquitous and always functions to marginalize, oppress, and delude people everywhere. The best that they can hope for is to bring the captives news of their captivity (a task similar to that of the reader of the “myth of the cave” in Plato’s *Republic*) or to inspire/lead the revolution that change the identities of who is oppressed and who is not.³² Micro social constructionists, on the other hand, are typically of sunnier disposition. Their work leads them to see possibilities; to treat even the most venerable of oppressive regimes as transitory; and to believe that they have found some effective tools for intervening in unwanted patterns of interaction and for making better social worlds.³³

TAKING OBSERVER AND PARTICIPANT PERSPECTIVES

By emphasizing the communal and linguistic production of knowledge, social constructionists are constantly reminded of their own participation in the processes they study. Rather than seeing this as an evidence of bias to be reduced as far as possible, they use this as a basis for acknowledging and taking into account the various perspectives available to them. One distinction among perspectives is that of a third-person observer as opposed to a first-person participant.

While not mutually exclusive, these perspectives lead to different questions. Both see the events and objects of the social world as made. From an observer’s perspective, we might ask, of any particular event or object:

- How was it made? How is it re-made in the on-going process of social construction?
- Who participated in making it? Who didn’t?
- What was the quality of the process by which it was made?
- Having been made, what does it, in turn, make? That is, how does it affect the on-going process of social construction?

For example, we might inquire how, among all the buildings in a town, one became known as a “school.” What was the process by which this was decided? Who participated in that process? What kinds of conversations must occur in this building for it to continue to be considered a “school”? What kinds of things must not occur for it to continue to be a “school”? How does this “school” affect the community that made it? For example, has it created a gap between those who are admitted to the school and those who are not? Has it improved the community by producing better-educated residents? Has it harmed the community by contributing to a “brain-drain” as the most gifted residents, newly educated, move away to find more rewarding jobs?

From a participant’s perspective, we position ourselves at a particular moment in the process of social construction (for example, at the moment when we step to the

³² Yeah, I know! Those who work in this tradition would express this in much more nuanced and subtle ways. Take this description as a conversation-starter (if not this, then what?) rather than a claim to have described accurately the prospects of “macro” social constructionists.

³³ Again, those who work in this tradition would express it in a more nuanced and subtle way. I guess anything can be reduced to a simple credo: a recent convert to “appreciative inquiry” told me, florid of face and in a raised voice, that my work in a particular situation was “not appreciative enough.” This struck me as an un-appreciative comment, and renewed my respect for the care with which David Cooperrider, Frank Barrett and other leaders of this work understand what they are doing.

rostrum to give a speech or decide, in a consulting conversation, whether to offer advice or to ask a question), and the relevant questions might include:

- What should/must I do now?
 - How should/must/may I respond to what has already happened, or to the context/situation in which I find myself?
 - How should/must/may I act into this situation that would serve me/us/them well?
- How can I/we make better social worlds?
 - How can I/we act in ways that prevent the occurrence of undesirable events and objects?
 - How can I/we act in ways that intervene in and improve already existing undesirable events and objects?
 - How can I/we act in ways that call into being preferred events and objects?

In general, “macro” social constructionists take a third-person, observer’s position, while “micro” social constructionists may take either first or third person positions, or even alternate between positions.

FOCUSING ON “PRODUCTS” OR “PROCESSES”

Some social constructionists focus on the “products” of the communal, linguistic process. For example, there are many studies titled “the social construction of...” where the missing term comes from the existing academic vocabulary. Examples include the social construction of race, gender, class, etc. Other social constructionists focus on the process by which these things are made, seeking to identify those moments in which we might act decisively to achieve a desired effect, or to call into being different patterns of communication.

I think that the difference between these approaches has less to do with intellectual commitments than with purposes. Studies of “the social construction of...” seem designed to have a critical edge, showing that existing forms of knowledge are limiting and oppressive or that taken-for-granted “truths” have been manufactured through knowable social processes. On the other hand, work focusing on processes is more closely linked to practice and action research. It seeks what Aristotle called “phronesis” – good judgment or practical wisdom. These studies are fueled by the questions of “how can I/we do...”

If there is something of value in this distinction, it also suggests why some social constructionists seem preoccupied by *knowledge* while others are primarily interested in *action*. All social constructionists³⁴ agree that knowledge and action are inextricable. However, in specific projects, one might serve as the support for the other.

UNDERSTANDING, CRITIQUING, AND/OR DOING

Twenty years ago, Vern Cronen and I collaborated with Karl Tomm, a family therapist, in a study of a particularly interesting case. We began our paper by reflecting on what is gained by taking a social constructionist perspective.

Once one has been sensitized to it, the process of the social construction of reality presents little mystery. Social constructionist inquiry has performed a vital service

³⁴ I get nervous when “all” is linked to “social constructionists,” no matter what assertion is being made.

of de-reification. However, a ‘tough-minded’ social theory must do more than simply repeat such demonstrations, showing this and that instance of ‘reality’ to be a social construction. But what else can be said which is not (a) trivial – at least as a theoretical statement, or (b) incompatible with its own assumptions? What can you say after you have said that reality is socially constructed and in what form should any such knowledge claim be cast? ³⁵

I recently had the necessity of returning to these questions with respect to research based on my own theory, the coordinated management of meaning, or CMM. In any given instance of work, I realized, one or more of the following outcomes might be the focus of the project. ³⁶

The work begins with *description*. What happened? In my work, this usually takes the form of asking who said what, what was said next, and what next, and so on. As this continues, the description becomes thicker.

Description is not and cannot be neutral, of course, and so the next step is explicitly *interpretive*, seeking to explain, explore, and reveal what is happening in any specific situation.

Work in this tradition may continue until it develops a *critical edge*. While some research methods in this paradigm, such as critical discourse analysis (CDA), starts with the premise that oppression exists and is caused by imbalances of power and exposes it, CMM performs immanent critique by noting what is missing, what is contradictory, what is inconsistent, what leads to unintended and unwanted outcomes, etc.

Finally, this work might then lead to *practice*, informing actions taken in order to improve situations.

EXAMPLES OF THESE DISTINCTIONS

In my humble judgment, the distinctions identified in the preceding section are not evaluative. That is, they do not differentiate “better” from “worse” social constructionist work. Rather, they pose somewhat different questions and lend themselves more directly to certain purposes.

The social construction of mental illness. Ken Gergen took a social constructionist perspective on the *DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual)*. In addition to being a reference book for clinical practitioners, it is also the basis on which decisions about insurance payments are made. If your therapist diagnoses you as neurotic, your insurance will pay for fewer therapeutic sessions than if you are diagnosed as psychotic.

Does the *DSM* name objective conditions, or does it, by naming them, create them? There are ideologically-formed answers to this question, but let’s refine the question on the basis of evidence. No matter how you want to answer the “name/create” question, we can all agree that each successive edition of the *DSM* (and we are now up to the fourth) is bigger and includes more ways of being sick than did the previous edition. Further, the various ways of being sick are getting more severe. What was once a mild

³⁵ Vernon E. Cronen, W. Barnett Pearce, and Karl Tomm (1985), A dialectical view of personal change. In Kenneth J. Gergen and Keith E. Davis (Eds.), *The social construction of the person*. New York: Springer-Verlag, p. 204.

³⁶ I believe this is a good characterization of research based on CMM. I think it might also apply to projects other than research and to projects based on social constructionist theories other than CMM, and would welcome conversations about that.

problem is now a serious one, and what was once serious is now catastrophic, requiring more visits, longer hospitalization, and more medication than before.

Three hypotheses would explain the evolution of the *DSM*. 1) Our research is getting better and we've identified hitherto unknown ways of being sick. While attractive, this hypothesis doesn't explain how the "same" problem is becoming more severe in each successive edition. 2) Our society is getting sicker. The expansion of the *DSM*, both in number and severity of illnesses, is a symptom of a sick society. 3) There is a lot of money to be made in the health-care industry. Physicians, therapists, chiropractors, etc., have a vested interest in diagnosing their patients with more and more severe maladies, because this directly affects the amount they are paid.

This is not the place to resolve the issue. We might note that the most robust answer is "a little of all three" rather than an all-or-nothing affirmation of any one of the three. My purpose is to note how Gergen took an observer's perspective that focused on the products of the "macro" process of social construction. By asking "what are we making?" and "How are we making it?" he is able to be a constructive critic of his own profession and the socio-economic systems of which it is a part. My description of the social construction of "burned out" that I offered earlier in this paper, by contrast, took an observer's perspective of the process by which this new thing was being made at a micro level.

Appreciative inquiry as a form of organizational consulting. David Cooperrider and his colleagues were organizational consultants working with a particularly difficult client, a hospital. They noticed that they felt beat-up at the end of each day on-site with the client.³⁷ As they explored why they felt this way, they noticed that the client was using "deficit language" – language that noted what was missing, what was wrong, what couldn't happen, who was to blame, etc. They decided to intervene by introducing "appreciative language" – by asking about what is going well, how the organization met previous challenges, and what assets they have on which to draw to meet the current challenge -- and noticed that both they and their clients felt empowered to act more productively and that they felt more refreshed at the end of the day.

Later developed as "Appreciative Inquiry," this is a powerful intervention at the "meso" level – somewhere between micro and macro – since it is most often used in organizations.³⁸ Cooperrider and his colleagues position themselves as participants in the on-going process of communication and take action intended to change the contexts in which they find themselves. They are asking both the product-oriented question "How is 'the problem' being made?" and the process-oriented questions, "How can we act into this situation that would serve us well?" "How can we intervene in and improve already existing undesirable events and objects?" and "How can we call into being preferred events and objects?"

The social construction of sexual harassment. Peter Levine wanted to contrast two ways of making moral decisions. He spoke against what he called "moral philosophy"

³⁷ They could have named their experience as being "burned out," of course. And if they had, they would have ... well, that's the point. The narrative structure of life that is initiated by "diagnosis" – what some call the "medical model" – leads to treatment and eventual resumption of normality. Cooperrider and his colleagues specifically distanced themselves from this model, developing the "4-D" model as an alternative.

³⁸ For more information, see Frank J. Barrett and Ronald E. Fry (2005) *Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Approach to Building Cooperative Capacity*. Chagrin Falls, OH: Taos Institute Publications.

defined as “an effort to develop general normative principles or procedures that can be defended with arguments and then used to settle at least some concrete cases.”³⁹ He spoke in favor of a process that, he says, is what we actually follow when we are not in philosophy classes. This approach has its origins in the thought of the Sophists and Renaissance humanists and involves judgment, in which we interpret and describe one thing as another. To make his case, Levine took an observer’s perspective at the micro level (a single case) on the process by which a charge of “sexual harassment” went from Nashville, Tennessee, to the Supreme Court.

As Levine tells the story, it began on October 1, 1987, when Teresa Harris quit her job at Forklift Systems, Inc., and sued the owner, Charles Hardy, for sexual harassment. From the first complaint until the final judgment, the participants engaged in four processes:

- They constructed coherent narratives, each selecting relevant details within a persuasive plot-line;
- They noted “family resemblances” among similar but different cases;
- They engaged in what Wittgenstein called “aspect-seeing;” offering descriptions of states of affairs “as” particular morally-charged actions; and,
- They developed “thick descriptions” of the events under question. These descriptions named, described, and explained the narratives of the events in question.⁴⁰

There was a time when “sexual harassment” did not exist – at least as a named offense for which one can be prosecuted. Now it does. Levine argues that the four processes described in the bulleted list above are the means by which sexual harassment was “made.” I suggest that these are also exactly the processes by which “burned out” is being socially constructed as a potential category within the next edition of the DSM and by which all of the events and objects of our social worlds are made.

CLAIMING OUR BIRTHRIGHT

I believe that there is a natural affinity between “communication” (as a process and as a field of study/practice) and social construction. In fact, one could build a strong argument that social construction is the modern expression of the sensibility in which the discipline of communication began (I associate it with the sophists’ principled commitment to understanding/teaching persuasion) and which has been a continuing thread throughout our history.⁴¹

In addition, the discipline of communication has something important to contribute to the understanding of social construction. As Bob Craig reminded us, it has always been a “practical discipline.”⁴² That is, we are not only concerned with demonstrating that this and that has been socially constructed and not only interested in

³⁹ Peter Levine (1998). *Living Without Philosophy: On Narrative, Rhetoric, and Morality*. Albany: State University of New York Press, p. 4.

⁴⁰ Levine, p. 37.

⁴¹ The grounds for this argument can be found in W. Barnett Pearce and Karen Foss (1990), “The Historical Context of Communication as a Science,” pp. 1-19 in Gordon L. Dahnke and Glen Clatterbuck (Eds). *Human Communication: Theory and Research*. San Francisco: Wadsworth.

⁴² Robert T. Craig (1989). Communication as a practical discipline. In B. Dervin, L. Grossberg, B. J. O’Keefe, & E. Wartella (Eds.), *Rethinking communication; Volume 1: Paradigm issues* (pp. 97-122). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

deconstructing that which our culture might otherwise uncritically take as “knowledge,” but we are also committed to the task of discovering, in any given situation, what are the available means of constructing better social worlds.⁴³ In the terms used in the section on “Distinctions Among Social Constructionists,” we have a birthright that positions us to make important contributions that bridge micro and macro perspectives by taking a participant’s position, focusing on the processes of developing practical wisdom about what to do in particular situations.

In my personal opinion, social constructionism can be seen both as a new, discipline-spanning postmodern theory and as a current reclamation of a very old pattern of thought tracing back at least as far as the pre-Socratic sophists. However, it has seldom been the dominant discourse and those of us who work within it usually have to be boundary-crossers: understanding, acknowledging, appreciating, and yet differentiating ourselves from other discourses that valorize other forms of action and ways of knowing about other things. When I began my professional career, my feeble attempts to speak in the language of “social construction” resulted in being misunderstood, marginalized, and – I regret to report – personally and professionally insulted.⁴⁴ I celebrate the current moment in which we can speak “social construction” as our first professional language. And now the opportunity is to explore what this language allows.

⁴³ You’ll recognize the larger structure of this sentence as a paraphrase of Aristotle’s definition of rhetoric. The specific term “better social worlds” comes from Kimberly A. Pearce (2002). *Making Better Social Worlds: Engaging in and Facilitating Dialogic Communication*. Redwood City, CA: Pearce Associates.

⁴⁴ W. Barnett Pearce and Vernon E. Cronen (1980). *Communication, Action and Meaning: The creation of social realities*. New York: Praeger, p. 13.

Figure 1

The School of Athens (by Raphael, 1509-1510)



Figure 2

DETAIL OF RAPHAEL'S "THE SCHOOL OF ATHENS" SHOWING PLATO (LEFT)
AND ARISTOTLE (RIGHT)

