Socially Constructing Communication

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Chapter 9

Tracing Our Steps Through Communication Social Construction

Six Propositions for How to Go On

Mariaelena Bartesaghi and Theresa Castor

"The first step," Wittgenstein (1953) reminded us, "is the one that altogether escapes notice ... but that is just what commits us to a particular way of looking at the matter" (p. 308). Wittgenstein's words underscore the importance of beginning constructions and their respective entailments to particular ways of seeing and doing. His observation is equally important to apply to formulations of social construction, as those may lead to specific ways of understanding and doing social construction research. In retracing and delineating our own steps as communication social construction scholars, this chapter constitutes a reflection on conversations about social construction both inside and outside of the discipline. Taking Wittgenstein's reminder to heart, this chapter articulates six propositions of social construction from a communication perspective.

Our presentation of social construction propositions constitutes a reflection inside the discipline, for we believe that social construction research in communication has attained a level of maturity that calls for communication to be foregrounded in our disciplinary exchanges. This is aligned with Stewart's (Chap. 8) call to "study, teach, integrate into research, and expand distinctively social construction communication practices and processes" (italics added). Our six propositions also (re)constitute reflections on critiques that we believe social construction communication practices are poised to address. Throughout our discussion, we do not separate social construction propositions from the critiques advanced against them. Making this choice demonstrates that we not only take critique seriously (the very thing that critics like Nightingale and Cromby, 1999, Hammersley, 2003a, 2003b, and Wilmott, 1994, have accused social construction proponents of not doing) but embrace a conversational notion of communication that, we believe, social construction uniquely privileges.
Our propositions for a distinctly communication social construction perspective state the following:

1. Social construction is a questioning process.
2. Knowledge construction is a relational process.
3. Communication is constitutive and consequential.
4. Social construction puts forth a realistic notion of reality.
5. Discourse is material and embodied.
6. Social construction is a practical and therefore socially accountable process.

Social Construction as Questioning

Questions are powerful actions within spoken discourse (Wang, 2006); they can interrupt and reclaim the floor for new voices in the conversation, problematize the "taken for granted" (Burr, 1995, p. 3), destabilize old communication paradigms, and invite an active, argumentative style into academic conversation (Tracy, 2001). In proposing that social construction is a process of raising questions, we conceive of three specific ways in which this is so: by means of theorizing and the research process, and by making questions the topic of research.

Breaking from old metaphors of language as mirror (Rorty, 1981) and communication as transmission (Carey, 1989), social construction presses beyond empiricist and positivist notions of effects, attitudes, and change (Krippendorff, 1996). Comfortable with the vocabulary of postmodernism, the communication social construction researcher formulates questions that are similar to those posed by scholars within history of science, sociology of knowledge, deconstruction, literary theory, and feminism (see Potter, 1996, for an explication of these traditions' footing in the process of construction). However, as is examined later in the discussion of discourse, accountability, and social reality, questions posed by communication social construction scholars are significantly different from those of other disciplines.

A second way that communication scholars pose questions from a social construction perspective relates to the enterprise of research itself. Rather than treat research from an objectivist position, viewing the endeavor as a way of knowing a reality "out there," social construction researchers question the subject–object dichotomy. Alternatively, they recognize the subjective nature of reality construction. This includes how the individuals being studied construct social reality and the role of the researcher in shaping the context that she is
studying (i.e., Briggs, 1986). There are various ways that social construction scholars have addressed this issue in how they communicate about their own research. Primarily, researchers tend to adopt writing styles that make explicit the role of the researcher in the research process (i.e., Kondo, 1990). In communication, autoethnographic narratives (e.g., Ellis, 2004; Ellis & Bochner, 1996) break the mimetic requirements critiqued in anthropology by Tyler (1986) and Marcus and Fisher (1986) by denaturalizing the "ethnographic I."

A third way in which a communication social construction researcher addresses questioning is as an explicit topic of study (Stewart, Chap. 8). Questions are a powerful resource for taking control of an exchange: They constrain the space for the next speaker, forcing an answer to follow in a conversational adjacency pair (Sacks, 1995; see also Wang, 2006). A communication thinker sees questions as potent in shaping identities (i.e., Antaki, 2001; Bilmes, 2001; Tracy & Naughton, 1994) and defining situations (i.e., Agne & Tracy, 1998). In political and news interactions especially, questions illustrate active and strategic attempts to control situations by defining social reality (i.e., Bilmes, 2001; Bull & Mayer, 1993; Clayman & Heritage, 2002).

Questioning is a crucial activity for communication social construction scholars. It embodies how representational models of communication and research are challenged. Finally, questioning is a crucial area of study for a communication social construction researcher in understanding how social actors engage in social construction practices.

Knowledge is Relational

"Truth," wrote Bakhtin (1984), "is not to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for the truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction" (p.110). By claiming knowledge as a property of relationship, this proposition challenges notions of mind, cognition, and agency as self-contained and places them squarely in the dynamics of interaction. Within a relational understanding of knowledge, the whole edifice of cognitivism is seriously shaken (Antaki, 2006; Maynard, 2006; Potter, 2006; Van Dijk, 2006).

As work in conversation analysis (CA) and discursive psychology has demonstrated, mental predicates are discursive resources in the everyday requirements of accounting. One of Harvey Sacks's (1995) most striking insights into conversation was how its dynamics revealed participants' thought; by studying transcripts, the analyst could see thinking manifest as embodied in the very way conversants would respond and orient to each other while attending to the requirements of the exchange (Potter, 2006; Sacks, 1995). The turn by turn dynamic of talk-in-interaction shows how mental states and representations acquire their meaning.
within the pragmatics of relationships where the cognitive vocabulary of thinking, remembering, and knowing is simply doing things with words (something argued brilliantly by Gergen, 1985b). For example, in his analysis of a session between a therapist and a child who "resists" him, Hutchby (2002) showed how the utterance "I don't know" acquires meaning either as noncompliance to therapy or as cognitive inability to access information depending on the therapist's moment-to-moment strategic decisions in moving the session along. It is the therapist's authority in the session that imparts the desired significance to the utterance. Antaki's (2006) conversational microanalysis of "producing a cognition" (the title of his essay) illuminated the institutional dynamics of the interviewer's purposeful choices in selecting certain responses on the part of the learning disabled interviewee as counting as valid answers. Likewise, Mehan's (1996) classic analysis of the discursive construction of a student as learning disabled shows how disability is the end point of a process in the "politics of representation"; rather, it has to do with different participants' access to speaking rights in the course of a diagnostic meeting, as the student's putative cognitive condition is up for definition.

Beyond the confines of self-contained individuals (Sampson, 1977, 1988, 1996) and the infinite regress of cognitive measurements, relational accounts of agency and identity also become possible (Robichaud, 2005). Developing Bakhtin's ideas on potential and responsibility, Sullivan and McCarthy (2004) offer a dialogical account of agency as lived experience in exchanges between self and other. Connecting agency to moral action and reflexive accountability, they advocate for a relational grounding of the concept: "through dialoguing with the other, we get a sense of who we are..." (Sampson, 1977). Work in the discursive construction of identity within such approaches as CA, discourse analysis, and ethnomethodology, for example, powerfully reconstructs the psychological (mentalistic, cognitivist) concept of personhood as an everyday relational accomplishment, as well as a topic of talk itself (Antaki & Widdicombe, 1998).

The move from the "radical hiddenness" (Shorter, 2000) of cognitivism to relational openness of doing things in communication advocated by social construction is described by Wittgenstein's (1953) philosophy of language. In his Philosophical Investigations, he wrote the following:

since everything lies open to view there is nothing to explain. For what is hidden, for example, is of no interest to us (1953, 126). How do sentences do it [manage to represent]? Don't you know? For nothing is hidden. (p. 435)

Wittgenstein's proposal for a sensory form of knowing, open to view, is, we believe, also connected to the relational, embodied knowing called for by
Lannamann (1998) when he advocated for a materially grounded version of social construction. Lannamann noted how “responsive interaction involves a coordination of bodies together in a specific place and time. This coordination is not located in a single body. It emerges as bodies engage each other—a relational embodiment” (p. 9).

In turn, Lannamann’s view for a relationally coordinated version of social construction connects us to Shottor’s (2000) notion of dialogical knowing, or knowing of the third kind (Shottor, 1997). According to Shottor (1993), there are three kinds of knowledge. The first is knowing that or theoretical knowledge, in the sense of unifying explanations of mechanisms (or cognitions) that we cannot see. The second is that of knowing how or knowing how. Again, this kind of knowledge, because it is unable to say anything about our ability to respond to each other in communication in coordinated ways, is not practically usable to a communication social construction perspective. Finally, Shottor suggested a third kind of knowledge, or dialogical knowledge that, following Wittgenstein’s proposal, builds on responsiveness and creativity (Schön, 1983). This is knowledge “from within” or from acting within the spontaneous flow of interaction in ways that are responsive to other and context.

As Sullivan and McCarthy (2004) noted in their reflections on agency as dialogical accomplishment, what dialogical knowledge involves is a furthering of our understanding of human connection, although the material body need not be present for the other to be called on in dialogue. Social construction work thus sets aside (theoretical, cognitive, inner world) notions of what is behind the surface of communication, in favor of a world where “nothing is hidden” (Wittgenstein, 1953). As Shottor (2000) suggested, this move allows us to focus on knowing “things which—amazingly—are already in fact being achieved by us in ways we had never thought possible” (n. p.). In a communication social construction perspective, relational knowledge enables us to know about what we are already accomplishing in our everyday lives together.

Communication is Constitutive and Consequential

Stewart’s (1995) approach to communication urges us to go beyond the epistemological subject–object split presumed by a semiotic understanding of language (concepts such as “message,” “sign,” and “code”) and takes us to an ontological understanding of social construction. Developing the ideas of Heidegger and Gadamer, Stewart proposed communication as dasein, the human condition of everyday coping and being-in-the-world. Language, in this sense, is not something we possess, but something we inhabit. Stewart’s argument is grounded in a larger model of communication as constitutive (Craig, 1999; Deetz, 1994): something being created in its very practices. As Krippendorff (1996) remarked, “we live
in communication while theorizing it” (p. 311). A constitutive view of communication is both self-generating and self-specifying (Penman, 2000). Because our participation makes what it is, with our “past activities point[ing] in the direction of our present ones” (Penman, 2000, p. 71), communication cannot but be material, moral, and consequential. We propose an understanding of communication as constitutive as key to a communication social construction perspective. With this proposition, we move for recognition of communication’s ontological function in constructing social reality as opposed to an epistemological function as a way of knowing reality.

The ontology-epistemology question is not new to social construction. Pearce (1994) and Willmott (1994) raised it in their responses to Shotter and Gergen’s (1994) proposal for social construction as a new framework for communication. More recently, Shotter and Lamamann (2002) pressed Gergen (1995a, 1998, 2001) for a reconsideration of his pragmatic, representational account of social construction, deeming it too elegant and detached from the messy world of embodied conversation. Postmodernism’s textual metaphor, so popular in its arguments and its entailment of communication as representation, has, more than any other metaphorical construction of recent scholarship, tilted the scales of our disciplines in favor of epistemological thinking (Cronen, 1995b). What is, or rather, is not “outside” the text such as bodies, power, and material consequences, has been either identified as a weakness of social construction or something that belongs in the unspecified, but more real world of the so-called extra-discursive.

An interesting exchange in this respect is the one between Hammersley and Potter in the pages of Discourse & Society (see Hammersley, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c; Potter, 2003a, 2003b). Hammersley (2003b) pitted “social construction” against “reality.” However, this is an argument within the representational view as Hammersley (2003a) wrote that “the constructed character of social phenomena is taken to indicate that those phenomena do not have the kind of objective reality normally ascribed to them by everyday social actors and by most social scientists” (p. 756). Potter’s (2003a) response is that the meticulous and rigorous study of people’s situated accounts of those phenomena by scholars of interaction, although not a realist move, considers the ontology of social life in people’s own terms. Potter’s explication of discourse as action and not representation, and as embodied practice of talk-in-interaction, can be understood philosophically through Stewart’s (1995) discussion of the representational problem in communication.

That communication is constitutive is interrelated with the notion that communication is consequential, an idea first articulated by Sigman (1995). As Sigman stated, “communication matters” (p. 1). Krippendorff (1996) provided additional reflection on the consequentiality of communication:

Although social scientists communicate in numerous ways—interviewing their subjects, engaging discursively with colleagues, publishing their work,
self-applications of communication theories are surprisingly rare if not totally absent from the literature. It is as if the communicative involvements of scientists were immune to critical examination or so perfectly obvious as to be not worthy of attention. This schism easily leads to theories that people find hard to live by. I know of no communication scholar who could communicate by the protocols of the classical theories they tend to perfect with their colleagues, for example, of communication as attitude change, as information transmission, as prediction and control, as management of meanings, or as institutionalized mass-production of messages. (p. 311)

We see Krippendorff’s metacommentary as a way to talk about liberating communication construction from entrapment in representational epistemology, as well as an exhortation toward critical reflection of the steps we take in our social construction scholarship. In the epistemological perspective, research appears as a representation of reality; however, this is, in fact, merely an appearance of epistemological seeing (as Wittgenstein might say). Step outside of its picture, and our research is very much real, with consequential implications for those so “represented.”

A social construction perspective is a constitutive perspective of communication. At issue here is the view that communication is an ontological enterprise in constructing subjects and objects. The alternative is an epistemological perspective that separates social construction from “reality.” The flaw in this path is that it is only a short distance before communication eventually mirrors reality in that “inaccurate” constructions can be rejected in favor of more “accurate” ones through good research. In choosing an ontological perspective of communication, communication is consequential or “matters” in that it plays an active role in shaping our social realities.

A Realistic Conception of Reality

Be it as a caricature, as a misunderstanding in the classroom, or within a moment of working things out in a conversation, a popular response to social construction is to attack its viability as a reasonable version of experience. Questioning is likely to proceed as follows: “So, reality is what you say it is? If you say that today is Monday, then it is Monday, regardless of what day it is?” (Phillips & Jørgenson, 2002, pp. 178–179). These queries, as Stewart (1991) pointed out, are born of the confusion between “that-it-is” and “what-it-is”: of separating language from our experience of the world, instead of understanding our experience as thoroughly linguistic. Once experience and language are separated,

1Thank you to our anonymous reviewer for this observation of the reality of research when we are able to think outside of the epistemological “box.”
we will be prone to raise what Edwards, Ashmore, and Potter (1995) described as the ineluctable death and furniture arguments, whereby the reality of tables (see this? bang!) and victims (what about the Holocaust? and the bodies that come back from Iraq each day!) are brought up as evidence of the speciousness of social construction. However, this line of reasoning attempts to position social construction in a realism–relativism debate in which social construction is placed in opposition to accepting material realities such as furniture and death and thus, on the losing side of the argument! Our fourth proposition, a realistic conception of reality, suggests how communication social construction scholars may step out of this argument altogether.

In the treatise that named social construction, Berger and Luckmann (1966) offered a way out of the back and forth of the realism–relativism exchange by theorizing reality as a process of fact construction. In The Social Construction of Reality, tables and taxes acquire their ontological status through a circular process in which human beings at once create the social world in interaction and then respond to it as objective experience. Reality is thus objective constraint born of objectification and reification of human interaction, as human agency creates the institutions that people come to experience as material circumstances that are already “out there” and not of their own making. Knowledge may be a relative product of our interactional choices, but it is a very real experience once those choices have been made. As a phenomenological account that privileges inner experience over actual interaction, Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) pioneering work in the sociology of knowledge can only take social construction so far (Potter, 1996). Inasmuch as questions about realism–relativism in social construction are questions in and for communication, they need to be brought within a reflexive notion of communication that addresses cognition and inner experience as topics for communication study.

Searle’s (1995) argument for realism and against social construction is evidence that the questioning has continued. Searle appealed to no less than sanity, or “a correspondence conception” of language with truth as an “essential presupposition of any sane philosophy” (p. xiii). Although he stated that speech acts partially constitute institutional practices (Shottet, 1997), Searle’s debunking of social construction rested on arguing that a socially constructed reality can only depend on a brute physical reality. In their own counter proposition for relativism as the “quintessential academic position” Edwards et al. (1995) showed how realist arguments about brute physical reality are subject to the rhetorical requirements of accounting: They need to be advanced by someone, from a particular position, and with a particular stake and entitlement. At the same time, “while realists shoot themselves in the foot as soon as they represent, relativists do so as soon as they argue. To argue for something is to care… which is immediately not relativist” (p. 39). Thus, both positions are ultimately untenable, with the realist needing to position herself in discourse and therefore making
a choice relative to another and the relativist arguing for something as being more valuable or "really so" than another thing.

Although Edwards et al.'s response to the impasse of the realism–relativism debate was to adopt relativism as a meta-position for social construction inquiry, our suggestion is another. We urge stepping out of the terms of realism–relativism entirely. With Burr (2003), we suggest that the realism–relativism positions are monologic dead ends that will preclude social construction conversational questioning. They are based on an objectivist notion of reality (Pearce, 1995), where "reality" stands as the opposite pole to "falsehood," resulting in "constructionism" standing for things being "merely constructed" (Burr, 1998, p. 101, italics added). Schegloff (2006) proposed new terms with which to reconstitute a realistic, accountable version of reality construction. By offering an opening for meaningful questions to arise between research agendas on different sides of an univiable exchange—cognitiveism and conversation analysis—Schegloff's (2006) is an offer for a relationally sensitive and materially responsive way to integrate interaction and cognition. His proposal was, in effect, to reframe the meaning of relativism from what is not (negotiable) reality to what is possible to address if definitions can be dialogically reassessed and accounted for, and to open the door for an empirical investigation of cognitive questions in talk-in-interaction. In doing so, he reconstituted cognitive science in conversational terms, situated the construct of mind in terms of a series of possible choices observable in interaction, and replaced the solipsistic relativism of mentalist propositions with the realistic, ontological social construction of speakers in interaction.

Discourse is Material and Embodied

With this proposition, we argue that social construction is poised to address what is now perceived by some (e.g., Burr, 2003) as residing within the realm of the extradiscursive: power and agency. At the same time, we hold that Gergen's (1998, 2001) suggestion for a no doubt stylish, if ultimately apolitical (Held, 2002; Lannaman, 1998; Shotter & Lannaman, 2002), version of constructionism offers limited possibility in this respect. Gergen's (e.g., 1994, 1999, 2001) representational notion of discourse—and therefore of language and communication—invited us to engage in a detached appreciation of the usefulness of available vocabularies of description and their rhetorical potential. However, it did not allow us understanding of the very material contingencies of persons in conversations, as well as what the consequences are to speakers orienting to each other utterance by utterance (Beach, 1995; Sanders, 1995).

\[\text{At Burr (2003) noted, Gergen's (1998) use of "constructionism" and "realism" as opposites may have added to this confusion.}\]
Among the theorists and philosophers examining the connection between language and social power (e.g. Bakhtin, 1981, 1986; Habermas, 1984; Vološinov, 1986), Foucault (1980) has told us that power is everywhere in communication. It is ironic, therefore, that in doing so he abstracted it rather than materialized it (Krippendorff, 1995), failing to offer empirical steps to help us find it (Thornborrow, 2002).

In communication, scholars of language and social interaction such as Thornborrow (2002) grounded a notion of discursive power in everyday discourse, linking interaction with the broader social and institutional framework that enables and constrains it, thus showing how power is empirically accessible and visibly co-constructed in the constantly shifting asymmetry of moment-to-moment conversational relationships. In her analysis of institutional talk, Thornborrow (2002) revealed how institutions are accomplished in the everyday orderliness of conversational turn-taking, while all the time leaving cracks open at the level of conversational order for upheavals in structure to occur. Empirical work like Thornborrow’s demystifies the notion of power as everywhere, or structural and invisible, by locating it in the dynamics of communication.

Also at issue with this proposition is how we may reformulate a notion of agency in discursive terms. Unlike a traditional notion of agency, agency in communication social construction terms is not bound to individual choice, responsibility, and blame (McNamee & Gergen, 1999; Robichaud, 2005). Instead, a discursive notion of agency considers agency established in relationship with others, as we position ourselves as the “I”: as actors in our own self-discourse (Harre, 1999). In conversation, it is others who grant us agency, by validating our first-person formulations. We see this notion of the self as agent as very much tied to a discursive notion of power. As Mehan (1990) showed in his classic study of a psychiatric interview, for example, our self-accounts are only granted agency by those with the power to define what counts as an agentive statement. Agency, therefore, as a particular notion of self is relationally and discursively bound.

By adopting an ontological notion of discourse, social construction scholars cannot eschew the political considerations of research and practical applications (Linnemann, 1998; Phillips & Jørgensen, 2002). The authors cannot, for example, abstain from addressing asymmetry in the research process by closing our eyes to it, or arguing that privileging our assumptions over those of our informants is an avoidable (or undesirable) condition of doing research. Nor do we believe, as language and social interaction analysts, that power is something that exists “outside of” our talk, as institutions or abstract social structures.

Accounting and Social Accountability

With this final proposition, we hold that accountability underscores what is social about social construction and propose that social construction is a socially
accountable process. In conversation, we are continuously accountable to each other. Our social membership depends on the right as well as the possibility to offer accounts; that is, on speaking in the expectation that our words will be taken at face value, and binding words to actions (Burrny, 1993; Harré, 1999; Shotter, 1984, 1993). Accounts such as descriptions, explanations, excuses, and justifications are the building blocks of our social and institutional worlds: We accept or decline invitations, we excuse our absence, we tell of our medical problems and receive diagnoses, adjudicate court cases, and hear why we get fired. It is exactly through the study of conversational patterns such as turn-taking and adjacency pairs that CA has rendered visible the accountability of action: the shared set of procedures by which persons in communication construct what they are accomplishing together in talk (Drew, 2005; Heritage, 1984).

By the study of the reflexive relationship between accounts and accountability, social construction communication research picks up where Berger and Luckmann’s (1966) experientially centered analysis of fact construction left off, and addresses the situated process by which social members advance, dispute, and authorize the meaning of words and actions from within the constraints of various social arrangements (Potter, 1996). Privileging accounts of knowledge construction that are conversational and empirical, social construction theorizing involves a reformulation of accounts of knowledge from the third-person version of “attitudes,” “problems,” or “memory” to a situated discursive notion of accounting.

How do social actors continuously transform the meaning of the social world and their own place within it? This question was at the basis of Garfinkel’s (1967) science of social action or ethnomethodology. Taking conversation as constitutive of all forms of social organization, ethnomethodology’s project was to document how speakers were able to make sense of social life in an accountable way, that is, in a way that made their own conversational accomplishments visible and rational to each other. Garfinkel’s introduction of concepts such as indexicality and reflexivity gave scholars the analytical tools to appreciate how utterances relate to the context of conversational sequences and how violations of preferred patterns of a sequence (such as rejecting, rather than accepting, an invitation) opened up information about the relationship context (Potter, 1996) in which the utterances took place. Ethnomethodology’s work on accounting as a socially constitutive process has been taken up by CA, with its anti-cognitivist, anti-intentionalist focus (cf. Drew, 2005; Sacks, 2005; Schegloff, 2006). In turn, CA has greatly advanced our understanding of how accounts are co-constructed—that is, advanced, questioned, repaired or responded to in preferred or dispreferred ways by speakers—in turns of talk.

As an example, in his analysis of a therapy session, Burrny (1996) shows that a therapeutic problem is not something that a client brings to the therapeutic

situation, nor something that the therapist comes up with, but rather is a con-
jointly produced formulation (Heritage & Watson, 1979). It is a co-constructed
account that emerges in the course of the exchange between therapist and client:
something that the therapist must tell the client (and thereafter work quite hard
to persuade) about. The therapist's work is complete once the client's account has
been transformed into a version that is therapeutically workable. Tying an awareness
of positioning and accountability to the versions of political or legal assessments
offered by social actors, Potter's (1996) work on stake grounded Goffman's (1961)
notion of footing in the dynamic of discursive negotiation. Arguing that facticity
is a rhetorical accomplishment of speakers, Potter showed how a speaker's man-
agement of stake may make or break the credibility of a speaker's social position,
of her account, and of its social consequences (also see Smith, 1978).

The work of Zimmerman (1992), Whalen and Zimmerman (1988; also see
Whalen, Zimmerman, & Whalen, 1998), and Tracy (1997) on telephone calls to a
911 call center), reveals the seams of a jointly produced form of social accounting
(see also Tracy & Anderson, 1999; Tracy & Tracy, 1998). By focusing on various
aspects of how the calls are constructed by those who are in and those who
evaluate an "emergency," these analyses show how help is a fragile, contingent,
and jointly produced discursive accomplishment, that depends on strategies of
relational positioning on the part of callers, and on 911 operators framing callers' accounts as "troubles" worthy of "public service" (Tracy, 1997).

Zimmerman's (1992) study of 911 calls directs our attention to the account-
able series of conversational actions that accomplish an institutional setting while
pointing out that the setting does not guarantee that a certain set of actions will
be routinely performed in an exchange. Callers to and calltakers at 911 will often
have to orient to what needs to be practically accomplished in the moment in
order to maintain the institution each time a call is placed. Wrapping the mental
construct of "hysteria" from the realm of (hidden) mental predicates and placing
it firmly in the accountable actions of a conversational exchange, Whalen and
Zimmerman (1998) show how "hysteria" is also an institutional accomplish-
ment of a 911 exchange. "Hysteria" is the descriptor advanced by the dispatcher
when confronted with an emotional caller on the line and a bid for control of
the conversation through the use of a psychiatric term of social control; it is
also a descriptor that only the dispatcher can advance. Much like Whalen and
of a request for emergency assistance that did not produce help, Tracy's (1997)
analysis of "interactional trouble" during 911 calls analyzes interactional trouble
to offer a grammar of practice (Cronen, 1995) for social construction research on
accounting. By rendering explicit the implicit metatheoretical knowledge that
callers and calltakers bring to the interaction, Tracy's (2001) discourse analysis
offers an understanding of the moral dimension of accounting in communication,
of action taken by one person toward others” (p. 738) and a conversationally
constituted method for evaluating the accounting process.
Cronen (1995b) defined practical theory as “concerned with the way
embodied persons in a real world act together to create patterns of practice that
constitute their forms of life.” (p. 231). The study of the discursive construction
of knowledge is contingent on participants’ successful interactional management
of versions and access to rhetorical vocabularies. As these make a difference
between a successful or unsuccessful helping interaction—such as who gets help
dispatched to them from a 911 operator—stays in therapy, or gets an acquittal
or conviction in the legal system, the study of accounting is practical theory for
communication social construction.

Conclusion

Grasping with these ideas has affected each of us in different ways, and we have
chosen to reflect on this individually. This chapter and the propositions de-
veloped in it are one step through moments in social construction; our respective
journeys are ongoing and the destinations as yet unmarked. When we met at
the summer institute, our concerns were not about defending social construction
assumptions to colleagues, students, or our dissertation committees, but instead
on addressing how to apply them in our teaching, research, and practices. I (TC)
realized that social construction in the discipline of communication had “grown
up” because I was having conversations about how to “go on” in conducting
social construction research (Wittgenstein, 1980) rather than focusing on more
rudimentary questions about whether or not social construction was viable. As
I engaged in conversations with others, particularly Marialena, I also realized
another way that social construction had grown up in communication in that
we had found our own voice. We could and were talking about social construc-
tion in our own terms as communication scholars rather than borrowing from
other disciplines. Our vocabulary included terms such as discourse, question-
ing, accountability—terms that embody communication practices.

My collaboration with Theresa has allowed me to retrace how I have
grown up within social construction. I have realized, for one, that the strong
pragmatic version of social construction that first appealed to me—and its idea
that I could pick up and drop discourses that were more or less desirable—has
been replaced in my work and teaching with an ontological perspective. I teach
a class on communication and mental illness and find that I am no longer sat-
ished with guiding the students toward a realization that mental illness exists in
discourse as well as (hidden) “somewhere” outside of it. Although the students’
realization that mental illness is a contingent phrase is a successful moment in
teaching. I want to push forward and have them "see" mind in our everyday communication exchanges.

As a communication scholar, I (TC) have been applying a specifically communication perspective to my social construction research. In particular, two of the propositions described here have been especially influential on my research. First, the issue of accountability has been a valuable concept for understanding how communities construct their social realities. The idea of accountability also emphasizes how this research enterprise is about social construction. A second important proposition that has influenced my research is how discourse and materiality intersect. As an organizational communication scholar, I cannot ignore materiality as organizations are (typically) housed in buildings, produce products, purchase supplies, and use technology. However, the existence of these material items does not run counter to a social construction perspective. Instead, they are part of the social world and part of how social actors jointly construct their realities.

I (MB) have also become, through social construction, a critical scholar. Like Theresa, I use accountability in my work, and do so to connect conversation and institutional frame and make visible issues of institutional power (Bartesaghi, 2004). Like Tracy (2001), I believe that in asking questions and orienting to problems, the work of social construction is most fruitful when it can contextualize microanalysis within social and institutional asymmetries or social injustice (see Bartesaghi & Castor, 2008). How to do this kind of work was part of the conversation at the summer institute and part of what we think remains the challenge of communication social construction.

It is difficult for either of us to imagine stepping forward in our research or teaching without the propositions that we have set forth in this chapter to guide us. At the same time, we look forward to looking back on this chapter, and maybe realizing, like Eliot’s (1943) *Little Gidding*, that the end of all our exploring might be “to arrive where we started and know the place for the very first time” (p. 39).

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References


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