Introduction

The present chapter is an invitation to the social construction of the future. We offer social constructionist theory as a way of understanding and enriching the practice of future building. The offering is thus a deliberation on the means to forming futures and the ends which might thus be served. The means and the ends—the descriptive and the normative—are intertwined. We begin with a brief account of a widely accepted vision of the optimal process for making decisions about the future and its shortcomings. This will set the stage for exploring the social constructionist alternative. After scanning its elements and the kinds of practices it invites, we touch on the implications for the future we might wish to create.

The realist/rational model of future building

In much of the world, the dominant orientation to making decisions about the future may be tied to a body of longstanding assumptions about knowledge and human reason. In the West, these assumptions are often linked to the Enlightenment period in human history and the turn from religious faith in matters of the future to a more secular faith in empirical observation and logical analysis. Abandoning the ineffable world of spirit, presumed here is the existence of a material or natural world, the character of which can be ascertained with careful and dispassionate observation. Rational analysis of the relations among observable entities, and testing ideas against fact, should lead to an ever more accurate representation of the world as it is. Within the 20th century, the Enlightenment turn reached its zenith in the emergence of robust scientific progress and the attendant belief that a scientific orientation to decision-making could lead to unlimited progress in our capacities for prediction and control. Through science, one could imagine, we can eradicate the ills besetting society, and move toward building a future of increasing prosperity and well-being for all. It is through following the steps of scientific reasoning that we create the future.

The realist/rational view is largely built on the assumption of a stable world. As presumed, the nature of chemical elements will endure across time, along with the constitution of mental processes, protons, neurons, and so on. Predictions of the future are thus derived from research, a process of observing, reasoning, and returning to observe again: to re/search. In this
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way, the orientation to the future building is largely reactive. That is, we predict the future by extrapolating from the past. Making a better world is largely in terms of either finding cures or solutions to existing or predicted problems or making derivations from existing knowledge to create novelty.

Such sentiments are central to what we identify as “cultural modernism,” that is, a broad cultural movement toward systematization, specialization, functionality, and economic progress. In terms of orientation toward future building, this orientation is variously represented in emphases on strategic planning, public management, and evidence-based decision-making. Yet, while remaining dominant, this orientation has also met with a variety of significant challenges. For one, world conditions have changed dramatically. Information and communication technologies have brought the world’s peoples together as never before; information, innovation, and values travel instantaneously around the world; the world’s peoples move about the globe in unprecedented numbers; actions in any part of the world may have broad and unpredictable ramifications. We now confront what are commonly called “wicked problems,” that is, problems that are impossible to solve because there are never sufficient facts, information is inconsistent and contradictory, any solution may be both good and bad in different ways, and there is no way to test a solution. To make matters worse, experts in many sectors of the knowledge generating communities may differ widely in the conclusions they reach from their inquiries. There is no fundamentally rational decision to be made in terms of economic policy, for example, because different schools of economics draw entirely different conclusions about optimal economic policy.

The social constructionist alternative

Developing primarily in the late 20th century, there was a range of scholarly movements that challenged the major assumptions undergirding the realist/rational orientation to decision-making. Many of these are collected under the rubric of social construction. As a philosophical challenge to the prevailing paradigm, constructionist writings first propose that descriptions and explanations of the world are outcomes of our relations with each other (Abib & Hesse, 1986; Gergen, 1994; Hjelm, 2014; Lock & Strong, 2010). These representations are neither maps nor pictures of the world but are created by people to enable their relations in the course of their various activities. This means that there may be multiple descriptions and explanations of any given state of affairs, useful for different groups in different times and contexts. Astute observation does not demand any particular conclusions about what exists, as our conclusions about what is real must be framed in a language that is intelligible by at least one group who shares its assumptions. We may commonly observe that the grass is green, but psychological research will tell us that the grass has no color. In their world of shared understandings, color is produced by the light falling on the retina. We may observe human beings moving about us, but there are no “human beings” in the discourse of physics.

Of course, these languages of understanding are scarcely detached from our various ways of life. Or, in Wittgenstein’s (1953) terms, our games of language are embedded in our forms of life. The language of psychological research, for example, not only creates the reality of “mental process” but is embedded in an array of practices—methods of research, measuring instruments, doing therapy, and so on. In this sense, universities are constituted by differing sub-cultures, each with its own way of life. Viewed in this way, we can also see that societies are made up of multiple sub-cultures, each sharing potentially different perspectives on what is the case. The presumed reality of the farmer may be quite different than that of the policeman, the doctor, or the priest, with different implications for values and ways of living.
The existence of the atom for the physicist is no less real than crime to the policeman or the soul to the priest. It is just here that we also see the impossibility for value neutral accounts of the world—whether in science or everyday life. Embedded within all our understandings are preferences—implicit or explicit—for certain ways of life above others. These preferences are continuously under construction throughout our lives.

There is a third outcome of constructionist ideas of special significance. In terms of creating futures, the emphasis on multiple and co-created understandings, shifts our attention from the more stabilized world of natural science concern to the more fluid world of human relations (Gergen, 2015a). Here we are sensitized to the potentials for continuous, unpredictable, and sometimes dramatic change. We replace the downstream focus on making predictions based on what has been to an upstream investment in cocreating what may become (Camargo-Borges, 2018).

Constructionist emphases in creating futures

With this background in place, the following outlines several central constructionist emphases in future building:

- **Removing the constraints of realism:** If our understandings of the world are not maps of the real but cultural constructions, then all taken for granted assumptions are fundamentally optional. Whatever we take to be “a problem” could be viewed otherwise.

- **Inviting imagination:** If we are not bound by taken for granted realities and logics, then we are invited to imagine the past, the present, and the future (Gergen & Gergen, 2012). What kinds of constructions do we wish to accept or reject, and for what purposes? What could we imagine as an optimal future?

- **Inviting collaborative participation:** Because our constructions of the real and the good are social in origin, creating futures should ideally be participatory (Camargo-Borges, 2019). With a world of differing constructions, any singular view moves toward exclusion, oppression, and conflict. With collaborative participation, we not only benefit from the richness of the multiplicities but maximize the potentials for creative future making.

- **Kindling appreciation relational practices:** Questioning the divisive tradition of individualism and rationalism, constructionism points to the significance of the relational process in creating and nourishing our ways of life. Practices that contribute to this process are essential to our future. Generative practices of dialogue are focal (Bushe, 2013).

- **Linking dialogue to action and material change:** Recognizing that discursive constructions are embedded in forms of life, constructionism invites attention to the coupling of discursive change to transformation in forms of life. This is first to point out that dialogue in itself is only the beginning of a change process; further efforts may be needed to realize changes in our forms of action or material arrangements. At the same time, this is to point out that changes in patterns of action or material conditions can also affect our discourse of understanding (Gergen, 2021).

- **Forming futures through inquiry:** Favoring a process view of the world, SC invites attention to the use of research as an instrument of social change. The emphasis shifts from assaying the world as it is to creating the world we would like to see(Gergen, 1985b). Of prominent significance are forms of action research in their emphasis both on participation and future building (Gustavsen, 2014; McIntyre, 2008; Reason & Bradbury, 2000).

- **Progress as infinitely contestable:** While it is exhilarating to see our activities as contributing to a better future, it is essential to be humble in embracing the narrative of progress.
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(McNamee & Hoskins, 2012). With multiple values distributed across various groups, any move “forward” in one context may be judged regressive in another. Constructionism thus invites a process of continuing, multiparty dialogue for evaluating programs.

Collaborative future building in action

Given this general invitation to future building, what are the consequences in practice? In what form are they realized in practice? An enormous array of practices has indeed emerged from this general orientation to the cocreation of meaning—in research, education, therapy, health care, organizational development, and more (see McNamee et al., 2020). To illustrate, we first scan a range of collaborative initiatives emerging across a range of professions. While not all of these are specifically tied to constructionist theorizing, all are supported by or illustrative of a constructionist orientation in action. We then offer a brief account of a constructionist orientation to designing dialogue for future building. This will illuminate some of the detailed lines of deliberation entering into the creation of such practices.

Future forming practices

The development of the ideas discussed in this chapter has been strengthened and inspired by innovative practices, in a variety of professional arenas, emerging throughout the world:

- **Education**: Realizing the inadequacy of fixed curricula, irrelevant to the rapidly changing conditions of today, and the corruption of the learning process through assessment, educators are everywhere developing practices congenial with the constructionist emphasis on the generative process of relating. Exemplary are pedagogies in collaborative learning, dialogical learning, connections-based learning, group project learning, cooperative learning, and unison reading, among others (Barkley et al., 2005; Mercer et al., 2019; Skidmore & Murakami, 2017). Such practices are at one with liberating curricula, including practices of emergent and inquiry-based curricula (Stacey, 2009). The full flowering of such practices is obstructed by the traditional demands for grades and high stakes testing. Innovative alternatives to this tradition are thus represented in a range of dialogic or relational evaluation practices (Gergen & Gill, 2020).

- **Organizational development**: Organizational managers and consultants typically employ a problem-solving attitude, focusing on what is wrong and how the situation can be improved (Gergen & Thatchenkery, 1996). Embracing a constructionist orientation, the practice of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) adopts a strength-based approach to developing organizational futures. The focus is on mobilizing assets and resources to cocreate new possibilities (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Understanding that meaning arises from what people do together, AI works with a language of valuing as opposed to a deflating discourse of deficit. A focus on “what is working well” provokes reflections on positive capacities and the ways these can be used to create fresh ideas (Camargo-Borges, 2019). The appreciative mode stimulates an organization to consider the best elements of “what it is” and to picture “what it might become” (Whitney & Trosten-Bloom, 2010). The efficacy of the AI process has led to its broad and worldwide application—in areas of conflict management, community building, education, health care, and more. In the organizational realm, it has stimulated a more general movement: dialogic organizational development (Bushe & Marshak, 2015).
• **Health care:** Health-care practices have traditionally adopted biomedical models, carrying a realist/rational approach to human well-being. Especially prominent is the top-down orientation to decision-making, one that favors the views of a class of experts over the realities of other participants. In a constructionist vein, professionals are drawn to more collaborative, context-sensitive, and inclusive practices. Especially in the therapeutic professions, constructionist ideas have inspired a new range of therapeutic practices. Most visible are forms of therapy (narrative, brief, postmodern, solution oriented), in which “treatment” pivots around the therapist/client negotiation of new realities. As well, constructionist writings have long challenged the professional categories for diagnosing people’s sufferings. As proposed, in categorizing people as “mentally ill,” we create the reality of “mental illness.” As a striking alternative, Jakko Seikkula and his Finnish colleagues (Seikkula et al., 2011) have developed the practice of Open Dialogue. Here therapists invite the patient’s social network into the therapeutic conversation. The attempt is to generate dialogue within the network that can open multiple possibilities for understanding and action. In addition, the practice brings into continuous, context-sensitive collaboration the multiple strengths of the network. Research findings indicate that the open dialogue practice is not only effective in its treatment outcomes but requires fewer drug prescriptions and hospitalizations than traditional treatments (Seikkula et al., 2003).

• While slower to develop, the medical professions now move in similar directions. The shift toward collaborative medicine was perhaps the first movement of broad significance, as physicians realized the inadequacies of basing treatments on the simple summation of recommendations from separated specialties. The emphasis on collaboration was further extended in movements toward *treatment teams*, which could include nurses and other providers. More fully informed by constructionist ideas, however, have been moved to include patients themselves in the collaborative process. Most visible has been the *narrative medicine* movement (Charon, 2006), in which the physicians expand on their biomedical understanding by listening to the patient’s account of how illness and cure fit within their life circumstances. This inclusion of the “patient’s voice” has also been extended to include the patient as a participant in the treatment team (Uhlig & Raboin, 2015). Rather than *working on* the patient in a cause/effect tradition, the patient is now *working with* others toward cure. Similarly, medical researchers are opening new vistas in their methods of inquiry by including patients or the otherwise inflicted as members of the research team (Abma, 2018; Camargo-Borges & Moscheta, 2014).

• **Governance:** Confronted with a world of increasingly complex challenges and prevailing conflict, a wide range of initiatives to enhance the process of governance have emerged. Many of these are specifically based on processes of collaboration and fall under such general rubrics as collaborative governance, co-governance, new public governance, participatory, and distributed governance (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015). Falling within these rubrics are more specialized movements such as the people’s parliament, relational welfare, the cooperative movement, deliberative democracy, dialogic policymaking, and the people’s assembly, among others. As a concrete example, by establishing social networks, along with meetings in which inhabitants could share experiences, knowledge, and wisdom, community members in the UK helped each other find meaningful work, support their health, and provide services for the elderly (Cottam, 2018). Moving a step further, public welfare agencies in a Danish city joined together in actively seeking out relationships with community members. This was especially important in neighborhoods where immigrant populations were both needy and lacking knowledge of available supports (Von Heimburg et al., 2021).
Dialogue by design

With this brief scan of relevant future forming practices in place, we are positioned for a more detailed excursion into practice. As apparent in the preceding review, a core element across many of the practices is the process of dialogue. In the present section, we focus on logics for designing dialogue. As proposed, social constructionist theory underscores the significance of participatory processes, thus sustaining the idea that people can cocreate their collective future through dialogue (Camargo-Borges & Rasera, 2013). However, while pointing to the potential of dialogue, all dialogues are not equal. Here we find it useful to view dialogue as a conversation in general, as opposed to a specific kind of conversation. We thus avoid settling among the competing claims as to what constitutes “true dialogue.” Recognizing dialogue as a conversation in general, we rapidly realize that many common forms of conversing contribute little (or negatively) to the generative process of cocreation. Argument, dispute, mutual critique, and blame are ubiquitous ways of conversing about “where we go from here.” None are congenial to the sharing multiple and often conflicting realities (Gergen et al., 2001).

The challenge, then, is to design forms of dialogue that can achieve the various ends in question. Rather than simply inviting conversation in general, what are the various components of promise for the kind of dialogue that fits a particular condition? The challenge of forming dialogic scaffolds for future-building is not a small one. For example, when multiple realities and values are in play, there may be potentially explosive tensions. However, according to Stewart and Zediker (2000), it is exactly such tensions that can foster creativity and innovation. But to what extent should one hold one’s ground and give way to ideas and images that are alien or “wrong-headed”? And what of those who are quiet, inarticulate, or loquacious? How do we talk together if we are differentially skilled in talking itself? There are also challenges in working with groups that do not trust each other; whatever is offered by the other is automatically discounted. And there is also the physical environment to consider. All may affect the process of relating, and all may thus be subjects of deliberation in crafting a form of practice relevant to the occasion. To further illustrate the range of considerations invited by a constructionist orientation, we focus here on only two issues of particular concern:

The significance of framing questions

Questions are invitations to conversations. If language creates our social worlds, then the words we use to invite people to specific conversational paths are of crucial significance. There is a major difference, for example, between problem questions as opposed to possibility questions. The former have been central within the realist/rational orientation to future building and its presumption of a stable world. In planning the future, one primarily focuses on what’s wrong with the present state of affairs. Consider then a dialogue in which a community is attempting to move forward. A problem centered discussion would focus on “where have we failed,” “who is at fault,” or “why has nothing been done?” Discussion might set out to locate the problems of education, economic resources, government, and so on. A bleak world of seemingly insoluble problems is now created, with divisive issues of blame ever at the ready.

Reflecting on the reality that such discussions create and the effects of such dialogue on the relations among participants, constructionists lean toward future forming questions of possibility. Here, discussion might begin, for example, with a question such as, “how did our community, despite the poverty and other struggles we have faced, manage to succeed?” Further discussion might focus on the positive resources available to move forward and how
they can be used to achieve desired goals. This does not mean that problems would fail to be
recognized, but their “size and shape” would appear less formidable, and the focus on col-
lective strengths would build community solidarity as opposed to dissension.

By designing different questions, other ends may also be achieved. For example, to promote
out-of-the-box ideas, groups might be invited into fantasizing multiple futures; to build soli-
darity, questions of mutual appreciation may be useful; to generate empathy, personal stories
may be invited. In effect, constructionism invites careful deliberation on the ways in which
generative potential of dialogue can be affected by the framing of the inquiry (Camargo-
Borges, 2019).

The pivotal place of not knowing

Decision-making in the realist/rational tradition invites dialogic convergence on “the best
solution.” Presuming the possibility of objective knowledge of a fixed world, continued
deliberation should succeed in eliminating bias, misconceptions, and ill-conceived solutions.
Supported by traditional education, participants come to believe in one right answer. In
contrast, as constructionists see it, this orientation to dialogue often invites arrogance, hier-
archy, and conflict over who has the superior solution. Recognizing the possibility of mul-
tiple realities, rationalities, and values, constructionists advocate a position of “not knowing,”
that is, the avoidance of claims to expertise, of superior knowledge, or unassailable logic
(Anderson, 2009).

This is not to abandon one’s privately convincing view of the world or field of expertise
but to realize its culturally and historically situated character. It is to foster a deeper listening
and a curiosity in alternative positions. It is to invite an orientation of mutual inquiry and a
realization that, while decisions may be required, there is ultimately no end to the conversa-
tion. We are invited then to “hold our plans lightly” (Spann & Simon, 2021). In practice, this
orientation may be encouraged by a moderator whose genuine curiosity and a generosity of
tone serve as a model. Invitations to participants to share their doubts or to speak about what
they find valuable in each other’s proposals can also be valuable. Many find World Café and
brainstorming practices useful. In all cases, the search is for conversational moves that reduce
the tendency “to know.”

If the future is ours to create …

Thus far, we have focused on a social constructionist orientation to practices of creating
futures. As proposed, however, there are significant implications of this analysis of the means
to the future building to the kind of ends toward which we might aspire. Social constructionist
theory does not itself demand or require any specific vision of a desirable future. However,
there does lie within this theoretical stance an implicit vision of a future toward which we
should strive. Consider that in our discussion of the generative process of cocreating, we vari-
ously drew attention to the significance of collaboration, the appreciation of multiple real-
ities and values, inclusion, trust, and humility. Our analysis explored the potentials of these
components for building futures. However, we should also realize the ways in which these
same components sustain and enrich the process of relating itself. What, we may ask, would
be the nature of our collective life on the planet should this generative process of relating be
absent or prohibited? To the extent that argument, dispute, blame, defense, fixed realities
and values, top-down control, and so on dominate our lives together, what future can we
imagine? If the nations of the world each seek their own good, on their own grounds, how
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much collaboration can we anticipate in matters of global warming, disease control, economic justice, and onward? What is the future of friendship, marriage, or community if each individual is seeking to actualize the self? We move then toward a relational ethic (Gergen, 2019), one in which the ultimate good is to sustain and strengthen the generative process of relating itself. And it is here that we can see the ethical dimension of the collaborative/dialogic practices we have touched upon in the preceding analysis. The practical means to cocreating futures become ethical ends in themselves. They begin to realize a positive future in the very process of seeking this future.

References


