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Feminist, constructionist and other critical theories

Wing-Chung Ho

While the feminist perspective is widely viewed as a form of critical theory, social constructionism and critical theory are often considered divergent by social scientists who prefer conventional theoretical traditions. It is thus fruitful to offer a review to readers – both sociologists in general and researchers specializing in analyzing families – of how feminism, constructionism and critical theory came to constitute a “critical approach” in family studies, an approach which endeavors to connect micro family issues with the macro institutional, societal and ideological contexts. This chapter will review the basic tenets of the feminist and constructionist perspectives as featured in recent family studies literature, with an emphasis on the trends and developments of the “critical approach.”

The critical approach

In sociology, critical theory is usually associated with the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research founded in 1923, and its central figures include Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse and Jürgen Habermas. Being critical of orthodox Marxism, the school offers “an analysis of ideology and politics and abandoning traditional forms of economic explanation” (Scott and Marshall, 2012). In contrast to certain principles of twentieth-century positivism, critical theory holds the view that truth claims are prone to distortions by existing “social inequalities, external oppression, or internal repression” (Scott and Marshall, 2012). And one source of such distortions – from the feminist perspective – originates in the ideology of gender which rationalizes the superiority of males over females in society. The resulting gender inequality is then dialectically maintained and reproduced through family relationships. A feminist perspective thus attends to what is “taken for granted in families, such as the unpaid labor for family members and of monitoring family life” and alerts one to “gender inequality and its reproduction and transformation in families” (Walker et al., 2005: 170). In this light, the feminist perspective is widely considered in both sociology and family studies as a treatment, or a form, of critical theory (e.g., Klein and White, 1996; Connidis and McMullin, 2002: 561; Bengtson et al., 2005: 13). What should also be noted is the debate over the relationship between Habermas’s rendition of critical theory and the feminist perspective which has been detailed by a critical mass of feminist scholars, including Fraser (1989, 1997) and Benhabib (1992).

Unlike the feminist perspective, the constructionist perspective possesses a less than straightforward connection with critical theory. In sociology, the term “social constructionism” is
not underpinned by a “critical” gaze at ideology and politics; rather, one can trace its philosophical roots to the work of William Isaac Thomas, George Herbert Mead, Alfred Schutz, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann. This corpus of work is deemed as providing the theoretical foundation for symbolic interactionism rather than the critical perspective (Burbank and Martins, 2009). The constructionist perspective is often contrasted with essentialism and emphasizes that “society is actively and creatively produced by human beings”; consequently, social worlds are not given as such but are made or invented through interpretive nets woven by individuals and groups (Scott and Marshall, 2012). It is opportune to note that some observers who hold conventional views on theoretical traditions may have a negative opinion of social constructionism. For example, the authors of the *Oxford Dictionary of Sociology* state that social constructionism is just “a general term,” and, since “in one sense all sociologists would argue” for the “socially created nature of social life,” the term [i.e., social constructionism] “can easily become devoid of meaning” (Scott and Marshall, 2012). Along this line, Hacking (1999) and Lynch (2001) indeed feature two insightful and widely cited critiques of social constructionism.

While, at their origins, critical theorists and constructionists face different theoretical targets of critique – positivism and essentialism respectively – the feminist view of family facilitates a meeting ground for both perspectives. When academia first adopted feminist critique in the early 1970s, the major argument usually took “the form of a reaction against positivism as a methodology capable of giving an objective account of social reality” (Sydie, 1987: 48). To be more specific, the critique was in opposition to the “mainstream/malestream” positivistic social science approach which was predicated on the necessary epistemological gap between the knower and the known, implying a relationship of the male active, scientific mind transcending over women as the passive nature-like object (Fee, 1981: 386; Sydie, 1987: 209; Eichler, 1988). Along this line, Oakley (1998) succinctly summarized the feminist contestations against the emphasis on quantitative techniques on a number of grounds: “that the choice of topics often implicitly supports sexist values; female subjects are excluded or marginalized; relations between researcher and researched are intrinsically exploitative; the resulting data are superficial and overgeneralized; and quantitative research is generally not used to overcome social problems” (1998: 709).

Through such a manner of producing “scientific” knowledge, the resulting positivist understanding of women is doomed to inadequacy. Moreover, since the positivistic claim that “science is value-free, objective and purely rational” is more ideological than reality (Benston, 1982: 64), the knowledge of and methods of knowing women are “integral to the practice of power,” and it becomes a ruling class of men who “produce for women” (D. Smith, 1975: 354). Feminist scholars thus put forward a “feminist standpoint” epistemology which places “epistemic privilege” to the standpoint/experience of women (Sprague and Kobrnowicz, 1999: 27). In the literature, the feminist standpoint in epistemology has been a well-discussed topic. One can trace it back to the work of Hilary Rose, Nancy Hartsock, Donna Haraway, Jane Flax, Patricia Hill Collins, Sandra Harding and Dorothy Smith. Readers may attend to the work of Stanley and Wise (1990), Sprague and Kobrnowicz (1999) and, more recently, Doucet and Mauthner (2007), which offer outstanding reviews of these scholars’ work.

Apart from positivism, essentialism is regularly criticized within feminist discussion. Heyes (2000: 37) highlights four senses of “essentialism” pertinent to the feminist critique: i) *metaphysical essentialism*: the belief in real essences inherent in the sexes; ii) *biological essentialism*: the belief in real essences which are biologically based; iii) *linguistic essentialism*: the belief in the universal meaning of the term “woman”; and iv) *methodological essentialism*: the belief in gender as only a general category of social analysis. While methodological essentialism echoes the “feminist standpoint” epistemology just mentioned, the other three types essentially made inroads in the
social perspective predicated on the idea that gender is a social—not biological—construct, and that the assumed self-evident meanings inherent in “women” (and “man”) are the effects of complicated discursive practices informed and constructed by gender ideology in society (Fuss, 1989: 2). Barbara L. Marshall extends this point even further by saying: “There is likely no area in which social constructionism has had more lasting and critical impact than in feminist work on gender” (2008: 687). In the study of families, universal claims about women, which exist independently of social construction, have effectively privileged specific/fixed forms of femininity over others. This has meant the normalization of certain forms of family structures and processes over others. Such a feminist-cum-constructionist perspective was also connected with postmodern/post-structural feminism which further challenged the unified and invariant meaning of “women” as the “basis for a general theory of oppression of all women” because it obfuscates within-group variations and glosses over the multiple identities that women have (De Reus et al., 2005: 449–450).

In an over-simplified schematic sense, feminism is effectively linked with critical theory via the feminist critique of positivism, and with social constructionism via the feminist critique of essentialism. Along this line, one should note the work by Weinberg (2008), which offers a lucid and comprehensive review of the philosophical foundations of constructionist research with an illustration of the intellectual linkages between constructionism, feminism and critical theory (see also Best, 2008). With these theoretical linkages, it is not surprising to see that, in critical theory, the feminist and the constructionist perspectives are finding a home in family studies (including the field of family therapy as well as nursing studies) as scholars explain how the key stakeholders of a family, including women and men (and perhaps the family therapist and other stakeholders), interact and construct meanings in specific institutional, societal and ideological settings. Such a “critical approach” in family studies is well established, in contrast with the “scientific” approach, which holds a view of knowledge that truth is objective and to be discovered, and the “interpretive” approach, which holds that truth is subjective and created by interpreting actors (Bengtson et al., 2005: 13). According to Bengtson et al. (2005: 13), the critical approach posits that “[t]ruth is defined by those who are in power, who impose their definition on others”, and that feminism, constructivism (its difference from “constructionism” will be discussed later) and postmodernism are deemed to be scholarly styles exemplifying this approach. More specifically, the critical approach presumes that the established order formed by the ruling class is supported by an ideological system which exerts dominant hegemonic influences on individuals. Individuals are ruled more by consent than direct domination or physical coercion. In everyday life, such ideological hegemony is subtly internalized in all human interactions; hence, it permeates our social constructions, and facilitates the (re-)production of people’s consent to the status quo. Along this line, family scholars using the critical approach emphasize in one way or another that family constitutes a key element in reproducing society’s dominant ideological patterns (Burbank and Martins, 2009: 32).

The feminist perspective

In family studies, the feminist perspective draws attention to different gendered and sexual contexts of family life (Dilworth-Anderson et al., 2005: 43). It queries certain unquestioned social norms and their attendant practices which systematically position the woman as subordinate to the man in the family. Thus, feminist family scholars usually alert us to “inequality in social structures and its reproduction and transformation in families” (Walker et al., 2005: 170). Publications in family studies have lucidly outlined the tenets of how the feminist perspective
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considers families (Walker et al., 2005: 170; J. White and Klein, 2008; S. Smith et al., 2009: 232–236). Their views can be summarized as follows: i) women’s experiences are central; ii) gender is a social construct which has been influenced by knowledge with an androcentric bias; iii) since women do not have an invariant role to play in the family, there are many forms of families; iv) since there is no universal norm for gender, and family forms and processes are affected by larger social changes, women may have vastly different family experiences in different cultures, places and times; and v) the ideology of patriarchy in society – and, more importantly, in the family – is a major source of inequality in women’s lives, which is linked with social movements advocating the empowerment of the disenfranchised against gender oppression. Referring to the different family forms and processes, S. Smith et al. (2009: 236) offer a list of family possibilities in contemporary societies, including “long-term cohabitation, single parent, multiethnic families, multigenerational families, same-sex families, stepfamilies, remarried couple and fictive kin.” Fictive kin here refers to individuals who are unrelated to someone by birth or marriage but have a significant emotional relationship with that person, who considers them as genuine family members.

The development of the feminist perspective has given rise to several strains of feminism which feature cross-cutting differences both in theory and in emancipatory practices (praxis). The liberal strain, for instance, aims to achieve emancipation and equal rights within the present institutional systems. The ultimate goal of the radical/Marxist strain, however, is to liberate and transform the prevailing sex/gender social order. As to the cultural strain, feminists aim to revalidate female attributes which are undervalued in society. To cultural feminists, the enemy is neither the current system nor the backward ideology but “masculinity itself and in some cases male biology” (Alcoff, 1995: 435–436).

In a review, scholars have reaffirmed that feminist theories, methodologies and practices have had a significant impact on family studies in rebuking “positivist assumptions” and defining families “in diverse and inclusive ways” with a vision that “is centered on a desire for and advocacy of justice and social change” (Lloyd et al., 2007: 447). In a fascinating reflection on family studies, K. Allen (2001) used her own experiences to illustrate how feminist ideas inform family scholarship and these experiences relate to her commitment to the revolutionary project of social change. Highlighted below are several intellectual directions which can be identified in recent feminist-informed studies of families.

**Domestic work contribution**

The time-honored feminist problematic of unequal family work distribution between genders, which was mainly explained by relative resources, time availability, economic dependency and gender ideology, was developed into a more sophisticated concept of “maternal gatekeeping” by S. Allen and Hawkins (1999). Maternal gatekeeping refers to a collection of beliefs and behaviors that “ultimately limit men’s opportunities for learning and growing through caring for home and children” (1999: 200). Based on a large empirical study, their work explores how mothers support or discourage fathers’ efforts to care for the family in terms of three dimensions: mothers’ reluctance to relinquish responsibility over family matters, external validation of a mothering identity, and differentiated conceptions of family roles.

Following on the concept of “maternal gatekeeping,” Sano and colleagues conducted a qualitative study on mothers’ perceptions of nonresident fathers’ involvement in low-income rural families. Contrary to some fathers’ claims that mothers “gatekeep” their access to children, most mothers in question wanted increased father involvement. Their study demonstrates that mothers’ actions, which may be interpreted as gatekeeping by the fathers, are often not intended
to discourage father involvement but rather are meant to negotiate more acceptable father behavior (Sano et al., 2008).

Questioning the fathers’ involvement in family work, Sano earlier cautions us not to overvalue the fathers’ contribution to their children’s lives. Just as mothers’ problematic behaviors can be detrimental to families, increased father involvement is found not to be universally beneficial, such as retaliation by abusive partners, or attempts by the male partners to gain custody and/or visitation rights, endangering both mothers and children (Sano, 2005).

**Critical race feminism and feminist-informed critical multiculturalism**

The intersection of the feminist perspective and ethnic studies in family studies saw the emergence of critical race feminism (Few, 2007). De Reus et al (2005: 453) state that critical race feminism is concerned with how the law and social policies have created a “multiplicative legal praxis” to help or oppress racial/ethnic women and their families. The genesis of critical race feminism is connected to the critical race theory informed by legal scholars. Its tenets posit that: i) racial/ethnic identity is a product of social construction rather than universal biological processes; ii) racial/ethnic individuals can possess overlapping identities and, hence, have potentially conflicting loyalties and allegiances; iii) intersectionality is continually negotiated in the lives of racial/ethnic individuals both within the groups with which individuals are affiliated and with other groups; and iv) minority writers and theorists have a role in speaking – from an anti-essentialist viewpoint – about race and the experience of multiple oppressions in society (Wing, 1997).

Serving as an articulation of De Reus et al.’s (2005) argument for greater use of multiethnic and critical race theories in family studies, Few (2007) offers empirical examples from how family researchers have used a critical race feminist or Black feminist lens to examine the lives of Black women and their families. Few suggests various ways scholars can embrace an explicit integration of critical race feminist and Black consciousness perspectives in family studies.

Apart from critical race feminism, feminist-informed critical multiculturalism also represents another way that the feminist perspective intersects with the problems of racial, ethnic and cultural equity in the realm of family studies. Arguing along this line, McDowell and Fang (2007) identified a “multicultural movement” in family studies which has shifted from a position of “celebrating diversity” and understanding cultural differences toward a critical analysis of power relationships based on group membership (Falicov, 2003; Dilworth-Anderson et al., 2005; McDowell and Fang, 2007: 594). Since people from different cultural groups and social locations often hold highly diverse conceptualizations of family relationships, this requires feminist scholars – who are facing different or even competing theories of family life and family dynamics – to develop “the skills and sensibilities needed to respectfully enter and attempt to understand the life world of those who are culturally similar as well as culturally different from ourselves” (McDowell and Fang, 2007: 557).

Echoing feminist-informed multiculturalism, Manohar (2008) examines how Indian/Patel women and men navigate dating in a Patel community in Florida. The study found that second generation Indian/Patel women and men both reject their parents’ perception of dating as non-Indian behavior and the American perception of dating as healthy fun. The author postulates that such dating patterns reflect the bicultural identities as Indian/Patel-Americans. Another study along the same vein traces the emergence of a patriarchy in Chinese immigrant working-class families in the San Francisco Bay area (Yu, 2009). Based on ethnographic fieldwork, the study found that this patriarchy is enabled by the articulation of “traditional” Chinese femininity with new or reinvented gendered expectations in immigrant settings in such a way as to build
and sustain its power in US society. This result also implicates the structural patriarchy and the racial and class inequalities of the host society.

**Reviewing feminist scholarship**

In reviewing how decades of feminist scholarship have been reflected in family studies, Fox and Murry (2000: 1168) identified four characteristics: i) reflexivity; ii) the centrality of practice; iii) a focus on social processes; and iv) a critical stance toward traditional paradigms and theories. The authors feel “a vague sense of discomfort with the seeming disjuncture between the body of work on family and gender as represented in some areas of academic study of the family, an evidence of a strong antifeminism, antiwoman backlash that has surfaced in many parts of the contemporary US culture” (2000: 1169). In conclusion, Fox and Murry (2000) suggest that family scholars need to be vigilant about knowledge processes in the field, such as tracking over time rates of research funding, research presentation and publications on the family utilizing feminist perspectives.

In their analysis of the visibility of feminism and gender studies in major academic family journals during the period 1972–2002, Wills and Risman (2006) identified a slight increase in the number of articles with feminist thought from 1972 until 1992. But, from 1992 to 2002, the authors observed a rather stable level of feminist thought visibility around 13 percent (Wills and Risman, 2006: 698). Wills and Risman offer two reasons to explain why this was so despite the increasing attention paid to studying families as gendered institutions. First, feminism has become so integrated into family studies that feminist thought often takes a non-feminist theoretical form, for example the life-course perspective. Second, since feminism could be considered a political philosophy that advocates social justice, feminist researchers then might “not overtly identify with feminist thought in their programs of scholarship because of fear of being labeled as activists rather than scholars” (Wills and Risman, 2006: 699).

**Epistemological critique**

Chafetz (2004) argues whether there is an actual feminist epistemology, and challenged the overemphasis of most feminist scholars on “women’s subjective understanding,” which uniformly aimed to produce “rich description” (2004: 972). Put simply, Chafetz states that there can be no such thing as a feminist methodology, as many feminist scholars use theories and methods developed by non-feminist social scientists.

This critique has elicited a fairly sympathetic reply from Walker (2004). Although Walker considers that the feminist emphases on women’s subjective experience and “rich description” are over-claims, she does share Chafetz’s proposed goal of developing non-feminist-specific explanations of human behavior and the social world (Walker, 2004: 993). Walker also agrees that feminists should use all methodological means available, “assuming its appropriateness to the research question, from in-depth interviews to demography to pursue our understanding of gender” (2004: 994).

**The constructionist perspective**

Among the applications of “social constructionism” in diverse settings, there are at least two ways through which the perspective has been conceptualized with more theoretical rigor. The first way mainly originates from *The Social Construction of Reality* by Berger and Luckmann (1966). They chiefly argue that the basic features of social order are captured in three dialectical
moments: “Society is a human product. Society is an objective reality. Man is a social product” (1966: 61). The second way is often coined “constructivism,” a term originating in social psychology. It refers to the process by which “the cognitive structures that shape our knowledge of the world evolve through the interaction of environment and subject” (Scott and Marshall, 2012). Gergen and Gergen (2008) observe that:

> the term *constructivism* is sometimes used interchangeably with *constructionism*. . . . [T]he focus [of constructivism] was placed on the individual’s perceptions and interpretative capacities as the originating source of their constructions of the world. . . . [And] recent scholarship has made it increasingly difficult to sustain the distinction between constructivism and constructionism. Constructivists increasingly find mental practices to be reflections or embodiments of social process.

*(Gergen and Gergen, 2008: 173)*

Among various strains of constructivism, radical constructivism is arguably the most well known in family studies, especially in the domain of family therapy (see Miermont, 1995: 74 for other types of constructivism). Rejecting the view that the world exists independently from the observer, the radical constructivist perspective presumes that “all knowledge depends upon the structure of the knower” (Maturana and Varela, 1987: 34) and that “knowledge does not reflect an ‘objective’ ontological reality, but an ordering and organization of a world constituted by our experience” (von Glasersfeld, 1984: 24).

In family studies, the work of Jaber F. Gubrium and James A. Holstein can be considered representative of the first conceptualization of social constructionism. Gubrium and Holstein (1990) reject the conventional understanding of family as a result of marriage, and outline a constructionist approach to family studies by considering how interactions among fictive kin (e.g., the other residents in an elderly or geriatric home, who typically are not related to each other by birth or marriage) cultivate emotionally significant relationships which constitute a form of family life (Holstein and Gubrium, 1999). This approach challenges conventional, almost universal ways of understanding family that consider “the notion of family as a determinate social form that corresponds to any singular or monolithic concept of the family written large” (1999: 4). It also represents a trend in social science theorizing and research towards more inclusive family, family pluralism and diversity (e.g., Baber and Allen, 1992; Thompson, 1992; Walker, 1993; K. Allen and Demo, 1995).

Harris (2008a) – a constructionist family scholar – later makes such further distinction as to consider the Gubrium and Holstein approach as *interpretive social constructionism* (ISC), while the social problems constructionist tradition of Spector and Kitsuse (1977) is labeled *objective social constructionism* (OSC). To Harris, ISC presumes that social phenomena are interpreted entities and so their existence and quality are largely constructed or accomplished by people’s meaning-making practices. OSC, however, is more concerned with what is actually constructed as “real states of affairs” without necessarily attending to what those constructed affairs mean to people and the intricate subjective processes involved (2008a: 234). Adopting constructionism in the empirical study of families, Harris suggests that, while ISC focuses on the artful meanings actors derive from family processes, OSC’s goal is to arbitrate between the “myths” and “realities” of family life or to authenticate any particular claim-maker’s account of the family (2008b).

The second conceptualization of constructionism is mainly adopted in the field of family therapy, with the work of Kenneth J. Gergen and colleagues being the field’s exemplar. From a psychological perspective, Gergen refuses to accept the presumption of “brute facts” to be discovered about social interaction, which overlook the social processes through which
“factuality” is established (Gergen and Davis, 1985: i). Such a constructionist approach to interaction eventually finds a home in the domain of family therapy with an emphasis on how social processes constitute meaning (McNamee and Gergen, 1992; see also Cecchin et al., 1992; Bubenzer and West, 1993; Anderson, 1997; Hoffman, 2002). Transforming fundamentally the definition and practice of therapy, Gergen and colleagues consider therapy as social construction. Their approach is premised on the theoretical assumption that conventional illness and cure categories are constructed and thus of questionable value to the client. Furthermore, the expert or “knowing” status of the therapist is “largely replaced by a view of therapist as an agent in the coconstruction of meaning” (Gergen and Gergen, 2008: 179). The emergence of narrative therapy (White and Epston, 1990) and postmodern therapy (Andersen, 1991; Friedman, 1993) is deemed the most visible development of social constructionism along this line. More recently, the narrative, or often generally labeled “postmodern,” approach to family therapy is further developed to “blend” with career counseling (Campbell and Ungar, 2004) and supervision of the therapeutic process (Whiting, 2007).

Evidently, the two conceptualizations of social constructionism possess different philosophical underpinnings, but share similar empirical concerns. Both view “family” as a social construct whose meaning is mainly derived from the interactions of the stakeholders involved. One difference between them which might interest scholars of family studies is that the constructionist approach by Gubrium and Holstein pays relatively more attention to the meso level, or the organizational embeddedness, of interaction (Gubrium, 1987) than the approach by Gergen, which emphasizes more one’s subjective cognition subjected to Foucault’s analysis of power/knowledge (e.g., White and Epston, 1990: 27). It is also interesting to see that, while the leading scholars representing each conceptualization recognize the works from the other side, they seldom cite others’ work, nor do they make substantial references to the traditional Frankfurt School of critical theory in their own empirical studies. Rather, the two conceptualizations seem to possess a shared theoretical concern with the feminist perspective which trumpets the diversity of family experiences. For example, Gergen clearly recognizes that “feminists have been frontrunners in employing interpretive research strategies, documenting the scientific construction of gender, demonstrating the pragmatic uses of constructionist inquiry, and exploring the foundations for constructionist metatheory” (1985: 13). As for Gubrium and Holstein, for example, they explicitly mention the work of Dorothy Smith as a source of influence to their constructionism (Gubrium and Holstein, 2012: 347).

**Diverse family experiences**

Attending to the social constructionist perspective on the concept of family, Lubbe (2007) examines the phenomenon in South Africa that gay people are increasingly opting for motherhood/fatherhood by creating families of their own or by continuing to live with their children from former heterosexual relationships. Through scrutinizing the gendered and sexualized perceptions that underlie same-gendered families, the paper challenges the normative conceptions of the traditional model of the two-parent (hetero-gender) family. It concludes that structural variables, such as the gender composition of families and the division of parental performances, are less important than process variables, such as the quality of relationships and care given to children.

Combining social construction and coordinated management of meaning in understanding family process, Montgomery (2004) explores the significance of communication and information about parental exposure to violence in torture-surviving families. The author finds that, when “stories told” by the informants are in contradiction to “stories lived,” situations
of ambiguity and uncertainty are created, which might lead to a strengthened relationship or confusion, powerlessness and action paralysis within the family.

From the vantage point that relationships are constituted through discourse, Ashbourne et al. (2012) examined dozens of families in Ontario, Canada who self-identified as members of the local Muslim community. Participants were asked to describe the time they spend together with and apart from their families, and the degree to which adolescence and immigration contribute to this experience. The authors argue that the “family time” being negotiated among participants supports Gillis’s (1996: 6) contention that families have an idealized time that they “live by” and a more objective time that they “live with.” This study calls for an expansion of the concept of family time so as to incorporate wider communal and societal influences (see also Ashbourne and Daly, 2010).

The ambivalent perspective

One evolving concept in the social construction of families is called “ambivalence.” Originating in psychology, the concept refers to the experience of contradictory feelings and thoughts. In family sociology, Connidis and McMullin (2002) examine how embeddedness in socially constructed relations creates feelings of contradictions among members of a family. Willson et al. (2003) explore women’s ambivalent feelings towards parents and in-laws to whom they give care as a function of gendered social relations. Scholars in these studies generally hold a critical view towards social relations which manifest “conflict and power and variations in the resources available to individuals when negotiating social life” (Connidis and McMullin, 2002: 563). An ambivalent perspective also points – in a similar way to the feminist perspective – to structural dimensions of gender, socio-economic status and culture which impinge on intragenerational linkages (Lüscher and Pillemer, 1998; Connidis and McMullin, 2002; Walker et al., 2005: 172). Along this line, Connidis (2005) further suggests that sibling social ties have made it a unique basis for creating ambivalence among family actors. Interesting patterns are identified along this line as sisters and brothers in the same family experience complicated feelings in response to the caring demands from their parents (see also Matthews, 2002).

Epistemological critique

The narrative approach founded upon the social constructionist perspective seems to signal the end of systematic family therapies. Dallos and Urry (1999), however, endeavor to offer a new epistemological framework called “the third cybernetics.” This framework shares the emphasis of “the second cybernetics” on meaning as being central to family dynamics and experience. However, “the third cybernetics” argues that meaning is more shaped by the shared ideas of a culture rather than just ideas of a personal and idiosyncratic nature. The authors disagree with some family therapists who argue that the move to a third cybernetics leads to a rejection of systemic ideas. Rather, the move suggests that social constructionism can be integrated with systemic ideas to show how family life is shaped by shared cultural beliefs or discourses, and at the same time features diversity through which these shared ideas are uniquely transformed in the day-to-day flow of family life. Along this line, one might attend to Rivett (1999), Sutherland (2005), Dickerson (2007) and Roy-Chowdhury (2010) for further theoretical reflections on the epistemological turn towards social constructionism in the field of systemic family therapy.

I have offered an extensive critique of what I call the “radical constructionist approach to family experience” of Gubrium and Holstein (Ho, 2012). I argue that, while Gubrium and Holstein often claim their theoretical heritage from Alfred Schutz’s phenomenology and Harold Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology, their constructionist approach to family experience seems to
defy certain basic tenets of phenomenology and ethnomethodology. In essence, I query the “primordial” status Gubrium and Holstein give to discursive practice vis-à-vis non-discursive factors (e.g., social structure, background expectancies, habitus) that govern the processes of meaning construction. Holding that lifeworld experience is largely non-discursive, I question the theoretical validity of Gubrium and Holstein’s research (see also Ho, 2008).

In reply, Gubrium and Holstein (2012: 343) argue that my endeavor to dichotomize discursive activity and the contextual non-discursive factors involved in the construction is false (see also Weinberg, 2012). Gubrium and Holstein (2012) reiterate their basic argument that “reality construction is centered in the real-time, practical work of everyday life, implicating both constructive activity and the resources and conditions of construction.” The authors state that, by taking this position, they have avoided drawing a stark distinction between the discursive activity and the social structure. They stress that the terms they have repeatedly chosen such as “reflexive,” “inter-twined,” “mutually constitutive,” “dialectical,” and “interplay” to describe human relationships have already addressed the significance of both dimensions in the construction process. As to my query on their theoretical fealty, Gubrium and Holstein frankly admit they have been theoretically “promiscuous” and their purpose is to avoid “doctrinaire arguments or appeals to particular versions of sociological faith” to bolster their perspective (Gubrium and Holstein, 2012: 347).

Families in Asian contexts

Gubhaju and Eng (2011) summarize the most current trends in understanding family resilience and transformation in different Asian contexts, including China, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand. These authors acknowledge that recent forces of globalization, urbanization, increased migration and changes in demographic trends have significantly altered the original family forms and systems (2011: 506). For example, the proportion of men and women never marrying is rapidly increasing (urban Thailand); family size is getting smaller, which is juxtaposed by the increasingly important roles played by grandparents in taking care of the younger generation (Singapore, Japan); the increasing proportion of full-time career women in society has prompted more support from women’s natal families, which operate “as a kind of extended family project” that makes women’s work–life balance possible (Japan, Beijing, Hong Kong); the presence of the Western idealized discourse of the “super-mom” has altered the public perception of the traditional male breadwinner-cum-protector model (India, Indonesia); and the increasing presence of same-sex partnerships has led to more negotiations on the tension between the experiences of homosexuality and religiosity in families (Singapore, Malaysia) (Gubhaju and Eng, 2011: 507–509). All these trends are connected to the main concerns of the “critical approach” to understand family while challenging the traditional conception of gender roles, cultivating the emergence of families with more diverse and complex forms, and bringing about ideological changes in the way families are defined in particular societies.

While more critically informed empirical studies on families in Asian contexts is expected, I compiled from current databases a preliminary, non-exhaustive list of studies along this line conducted in the past decade or so. The countries described below include some surprises: the “critical approach” to family experience has been adopted in relatively less globalized Asian countries, such as North Korea, Vietnam and Pakistan.

China

Based on quantitative data from over a thousand childbearing women in rural Yunnan, Li (2005) studied two dimensions of rural women’s status: i) the amount of housework done
by the husband; and ii) women’s exposure to power and autonomy in the larger world. The study found that female literacy and family socio-economic status are positively associated with women’s status, whereas the extended household structure and spousal age differences have a negative effect on women’s status. Minority women and women from the plains share more of the housework with their husbands than Han women and those from mountain villages. Han Chinese women and those residing in the plains, however, enjoy greater decision-making power than minority women and women residing in mountainous areas.

Drawing upon several case studies, Nie (2010) discusses eight major problems arising from coercive state intervention in sex-selective abortion leading to the phenomenon of 40 million “missing” females in China. These major problems include neglect of reproductive liberty and reproductive rights; the hidden dangers of state power; inconsistency with existing abortion policies; practical ineffectiveness; underestimating the costs and resistance involved; simplifying and misrepresenting the key issues; the lack of sufficient public discussion; and ignoring the moral and political principles established by traditional Chinese thought. Nie suggests developing an alternative family program in society which focuses on women, and is essentially community-oriented and voluntary in nature.

**Hong Kong**

Lau (2003) argues that researchers and social workers whose work aims at empowering single parent families have inadvertently participated in a social construction process that reinforces a pathological perspective on these families. Based on empirical evidence, the author finds that the construction process has paradoxically caused single parent families in Hong Kong to be disempowered through a welfare service system that identifies their difficulties and vulnerabilities. Her study suggests a “both–and” perspective that takes into account both the needs and difficulties, and the strengths and successes, of these families.

Echoing Holstein and Gubrium (2000a, 2000b), who have brought attention to the ways construction of the person proceeds across the life span, Ho and Cheung (2011) illustrate the structural constraints faced by mothers and their strategies to manage work and childcare in low-income communities in Hong Kong. Results reflect differential constructions made by mothers in their 30s and 40s in how to manage the dual pressures of childcare and limited income. Accordingly, younger mothers are fully concerned with childcare, as their children are younger. Older mothers, in contrast, suffer more from work–family conflict, as they are more likely to have a job.

**India**

Informed by social constructionist and contextual approaches, Sonpar (2005) investigates certain common issues with which marital couples in India struggle. Observed in the process of family therapy, these issues arise from the way Indian families are typically structured and the rules that govern family relationships. Sonpar suggests that family therapists must be mindful of the enduring integrity of family bonds and the implication of therapy as being “disloyal” to the family. Sooryamoorthy (2012) reports on several studies on the Indian family system. The author reaffirms that the Indian family is a solid foundation of Indian social structure, indicating that it has survived the test of time during several phases of social growth and transition. The author also suggests that the traditional joint family system is still common, while all forms of families – nuclear, extended and several other forms – exist side by side across the country.
Japan

To show that Japanese families exist in diverse, complex and contested forms, Merry Isaacs White (2002) looks back at two key moments of “family making” – the Meiji era and postwar period – to see how models of the Japanese family have been constructed. Debunking the idealized image of the Japanese family as the exemplar of traditional family values (e.g., stability, dutifulness, homogeneity and harmony), the author portrays the everyday reality of a range of families, including that of the young married couple who experience fleeting togetherness until the first child is born, a family where the spouses are separated by job shifts, a family with a grandmother as babysitter and a family without children.

Roberson and Suzuki (2003)’s edited book examines the changing role of men and the construction of masculinity in contemporary Japan. This publication moves beyond the stereotype of the Japanese white-collar businessman to explore the diversity of identities and experiences that may be found among men in contemporary Japan, including those versions of masculinity which are marginalized and subversive.

Pakistan

Jafar (2005) describes how “family law” affects women’s life in Islam. Having outlined the history of Pakistan’s experience with Islamic laws and their impact on women, the paper traces the link between the state, nationalism, religion and women’s organizations, and demonstrates how they have shaped women’s lives in Pakistan.

Daneshpour (2005) observes that Islamic feminists are challenging the fundamentalists’ interpretation of Islam on many grounds. According to the author, Islamic feminists are proposing changes, including: i) making women’s contributions more visible; ii) forming women’s organizations; iii) raising women’s consciousness of their existing condition; iv) changing people’s perceptions on women; v) ending inequalities both in laws and in actual social practice through provision of equal opportunities for both genders; and vi) transforming cultural concepts about gender.

North Korea

Ryang (2000) examines the little-known area of women and gender relations in North Korea. Based on published literature as well as on partial ethnographic data, the study finds that the status of North Korean women is similar to that of women in the former Soviet-influenced socialist states, but differs in one important area, that is, the relationship to the nation’s leader. The author suggests that, whereas the category “mother” exists, the category “women” is hardly recognized, thereby effacing the notion of gender altogether from the surface of state politics.

Vietnam

Based on a range of primary data, both qualitative and qualitative, Werner (2009) examines gender in post-revolutionary Vietnam. Focusing on gender relations in the family and state since the onset of economic reform in 1986, the author demonstrates that women hold a great deal less power than men in both the family and the wider community. Werner suggests that, while the household remains a highly statist sphere, the unequal status between the two genders in the
family is based on kinship ties that provide the underlying structure of the family and depend less on the economic contributions of men and women. The analysis further explores the ways in which the state utilizes gender constructions to advance its political interests.

References


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Feminist, constructionist and other critical theories


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