

Brief Encounters from the Taos Institute October 2011



What Counts as Social Construction?

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How do we identify what is social construction in our theories and practices? What doesn't count as social construction? Was Michael White a constructionist, or Michel Foucault; and are all collaborative practices constructionist? These questions were recently the subject of lively debate among some of the Taos Associates. To appreciate the issues and to deepen understanding of social construction, it is first useful to recognize a very important, but often overlooked distinction. This is the distinction between social construction as a *metatheory*, or a general orientation to life, and social construction as a *specific or local* set of constructed ideas and practices. What does this mean? At the level of metatheory, one simply views all theories and practices as social constructions. This is to recognize that all our languages, customs and traditions are outcomes of people's relations. None are required; all are perishable. Many find this orientation useful and inspiring because it invites us to reflect critically and appreciatively on our traditions and simultaneously to join in creating new realities and ways of life. One may also embrace this general orientation and participate in any range of practices - scientific, religious, professional, and so on. Nothing is required.

However, on the level of specifics, among the innumerable socially constructed practices available or under development is social construction itself. Here one participates in a range of specific ideas, dealing for example with the way we use narrative and metaphor in constructing the world, the ideological basis of various constructions, issues of marginalization and power, and so on. Or, one might draw from constructionist ideas in doing therapy, consulting, teaching, practicing law, and the like. At this local level, one *can* distinguish between constructionist work, and a host of alternatives. For example, constructionist therapies will tend to differ from psychoanalytic or cognitive; organizational development practices in a constructionist vein will look different from modernist strategic practices; constructionist practices in the classroom will differ from old fashioned hierarchical practices.

But the lines are fuzzy! This is first because constructionist ideas are not owned by anyone or written in stone. They are outcomes of dialogue - now world-wide - and there are many different accents and emphases. The dialogue continues, and from a constructionist standpoint, this is all to the good.

By the same token there are theorists and practitioners who have contributed enormously to these dialogues, but who have also contributed to traditions not typically identified with constructionism. For example, any thorough constructionist education will cover Foucault's theorizing on power/knowledge, but not all Foucault's ideas are congenial with constructionist dialogues; Michael White's narrative therapy has been emblematic of the constructionist shift in therapy, but not all of White's views are shared by constructionists.

Further, there are theories and practices that were once quite alien to constructionism, but are slowly merging with it. Cognitive constructivism is a good example. And finally, there are theories and practices that, while not specifically constructionist, overlap in assumptions or emphases, and generate mutually enriching dialogue. Relational psychoanalysis, complexity theory, collaborative organization work, and the collaborative classroom movement are all exemplary. So, the dialogues continue, and herein lies a source of continuous excitement and creativity.