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

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

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

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

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

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2 The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. This is the official description of conditions recognized by the American Psychological Association
get it right. However, if burn-out and other events and objects are made, then more complex responses are possible.

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

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

Taking a social construction approach also makes things like “burn-out” seem “fluid” and “plastic.” There was a time when they were not, and will be a time in which they are not. Between these parameters, they are contingent on how people act. In this way, the social construction approach positions us to make practical judgments.

TAKING A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION APPROACH

My purpose in this chapter is to provide a gentle introduction to the boisterous paradigm of scholars and practitioners who take the social construction approach. The common thread in this paradigm is the idea that reality itself, or at least our knowledge of it, is, wholly or in part, the product of our own actions. The phrases set off by commas in the preceding sentence mark sites of disagreement among those taking this approach and account for most of the different flavors within the paradigm. The main stem of the sentence grounds a perspective that sees the events and objects of our social worlds as fabricated, us as complicit in their fabrication, and us as the beneficiaries and/or victims of the things we and others have made. In this paradigm, epistemology (what do we know?) is thoroughly penetrated by ethics (what did/should we do?).

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

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

TWO NARRATIVES OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

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

Against Descartes: The Usual Story

The most common story told by social constructionists begins with the Enlightenment. For reasons usually not included in this narrative, Descartes (the villain) introduced a way of thinking that defined individuals as autonomous, knowledge as the affirmation of undoubtable propositions (cogito ergo sum), the

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4 Descartes “method” was intended as a way to end the interminable conflict between Catholics and Protestants that wrapped Europe in devastating war. See chapters 1 and 2 of Toulmin, Stephen (1990), Cosmopolis: The hidden agenda of modernity. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
world as dualistic (separating cognitions within our heads from the events and objects of the outside world), and nature as objects interacting with each other on the basis of laws.

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

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

Renewing A Neglected Voice In Western Intellectual History

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

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

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

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6 I’m trying to write this in a manner that acknowledges that they were a heterogeneous, playful lot who, for principled reasons, did not attempt to construct a systematic philosophy.
this story asserts, is a result of having to shout so loud to be heard, or to fight so hard for legitimacy against the linguistic tyranny of the positivists.\(^7\)

**Shared Commitments of Social Constructionists**

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

Contemporary constructionism has multiple roots. They grow from a variety of different dialogues that span the humanities and the sciences. In this sense, social constructionism is not a singular and unified position. Rather, it is better seen as an unfolding dialogue among participants who vary considerably in their logics, values, and visions. To be sure, there is substantial sharing, but there is no single slate of assumptions to which all would adhere. And the dialogues remain in motion. To articulate a final truth, a foundational logic, or a code of values would indeed be antithetical to the flow of the dialogue itself.\(^8\)

That having been said, the Gergens think it possible to identify three “major lines of argument central to a constructionist sensibility.”\(^9\)

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


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

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

- **A critical stance toward taken-for-granted knowledge.** It invites us to
  be critical of the idea that our observations of the world
  unproblematically yield its nature to us, to challenge the view that
  conventional knowledge is based upon objective, unbiased
  observation of the world.

- **Historical and cultural specificity.** All ways of understanding are
  historically and culturally relative...products of that culture and are
  dependent upon the particular social and economic arrangements
  prevailing in that time.

- **Knowledge is sustained by social processes.** It is through daily
  interactions between people in the course of social life that our
  versions of knowledge become fabricated.

- **Knowledge and social action go together.** Descriptions or constructions
  of the world therefore sustain some patterns of social action and
  exclude others. Our constructions of the world are therefore bound up
  with power relationships because they have implications for what it is
  permissible for different people to do, and for how they may treat
  others.\(^{11}\)

Several of the sub-groups in the Summer Institute co-sponsored by the NCA and
the Crooked Timbers group\(^ {12}\) developed summary statements of their concepts of a
social construction approach to communication, or a communication approach to
social construction. One such group specified these as useful summary statements:

- Communication makes us **human**.

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12 Shawn Spano, Karen A. Foss, Kris Kirschbaum, and Stephen W. Littlejohn, “Creating opportunities for
social construction: The Albuquerque Summer Institute,” this volume.
• We exist in communication.
• Diverse realities exist simultaneously.
• Realities are created in communication and inform the character of the process.
• Power is the social construction of affordances and constraints.
• Every action is an intervention.
• Our aim is to enrich what makes us human and to transform the practices that impede the full expression of everyone’s humanity.\(^{13}\)

**Critique Of Central Features Of Other Paradigms**

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

One of the leading figures in what has come to be called symbolic interactionism, Herbert Blumer wrote two powerful essays that critique what he called “empirical science.” One criticized the then-dominant notion of theory,\(^{14}\) the other the concept of the variable.\(^{15}\) Both made the point that the world is far too ambiguous and the process of knowing far too reflexively convoluted to have either theoretical concepts or operationally defined variables that serve us well.

Ken Gergen scandalized social psychologists by writing an essay that showed that their knowledge-claims should be understood as historical artifacts rather than timeless truths.\(^{16}\) He followed this essay with another that called his colleagues to perceive theory as generating insights, making certain forms of action possible, and either reconstructing or redistributing power rather than intellectually and politically neutral representations of states of affairs. As such, by the nature of their business, theorists are necessarily involved in moral/political questions and engaged with (or against) the interests of those they are studying or describing. The image of the isolated “ivory tower” of detached academic endeavor, he argued, is an untenable misperception of the process of research and theory-building.\(^{17}\) …

**CLAIMING OUR BIRTHRIGHT**

The discipline of communication has something important to contribute to the understanding of social construction. As Bob Craig reminded us, it has always

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been a “practical discipline.”18 That is, we are not only concerned with demonstrating that this and that has been socially constructed and not only interested in deconstructing that which our culture might otherwise uncritically take as “knowledge,” but we are also committed to the task of discovering, in any given situation, what are the available means of constructing better social worlds.19 We have a birthright that positions us to make important contributions that bridge micro and macro perspectives by taking a participant’s position, focusing on the processes of developing practical wisdom about what to do in particular situations.

In my personal opinion, social constructionism can be seen both as a new, discipline-spanning postmodern theory and as a current reclamation of a very old pattern of thought tracing back at least as far as the ancient Greek, Socrates. However, it has seldom been the dominant discourse and those of us who work within it usually have to be boundary-crossers: understanding, acknowledging, appreciating, and yet differentiating ourselves from other discourses that valorize other forms of action and ways of knowing about other things. When I began my professional career, my feeble attempts to speak in the language of “social construction” resulted in being misunderstood, marginalized, and – I regret to report – personally and professionally insulted.20 I celebrate the current moment in which we can speak “social construction” as our first professional language. And now the opportunity is to explore what this language allows.