

Handbook of Constructionist Research, edited by James A. Holstein & Jaber F. Gubrium. New York, NY: Guilford, 2008. 822 pages. \$100

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Very broadly speaking, social constructionism—a notion originating in sociology—is the view that the meaning of the state of things (e.g., childhood, family), practices (marriage), conditions (disability), behavior (shoplifting), and so on is always interpreted or constructed in specific linguistic (discursive), social, historical, and material contexts. In other words, meaning is not simply given, nor is it to be taken for granted. The social constructionist understanding animates many approaches to evaluation that are primarily concerned with program and policy processes and how stakeholders (policymakers, funders, program beneficiaries, program implementers, etc.) view and make sense of a program or policy and its value.

As an intellectual movement and empirical perspective in the social and behavioral sciences, social constructionism defies simple description and ready encapsulation. This is so largely because there are several different epistemological, methodological, and practical arguments that have been offered for its justification resulting in a variety of social constructionisms, so to speak. A useful, if massive, guide to grasping the entirety of what they call the “the constructionist mosaic” is offered in this volume by Holstein and Gubrium, two accomplished editors and long-time collaborators widely recognized for their

insightful conceptual, methodological, and empirical contributions to constructionist studies. They have assembled an international array of highly accomplished scholars as chapter authors.

This is a scholarly reference work of use to social-behavioral researchers as well as graduate students seeking a more complete and thorough understanding of what comprises the social constructionist enterprise. The forty chapters comprising the *Handbook* are organized into six major sections. Section one contains two chapters that serve as a launching platform for the remainder of the book. Chapter 1 addresses basic philosophical issues implicated in social constructionist thinking. Chapter 2 discusses the history of social constructionism as a research agenda. Section two of the book contains nine chapters, each of which is focused on assumptions and methodologies of social constructionist studies in a given area of study or discipline, including anthropology, communication research, education, management and organization studies, nursing research, psychology, public policy, science and technology studies, and sociology. Section three of the book deals with the varieties of social constructionism not from a disciplinary perspective but more the point of view of object of analysis. Chapters discuss Foucauldian, discursive, narrative, and

interactionist perspectives, as well as focusing on the construction of claimsmaking, deviance, and social problems. Section four of the book turns toward methods and procedures for generating and analyzing empirical material with six chapters discussing interview and field methods, discourse analysis, autoethnography, and grounded theory. The fifth section of the *Handbook* illustrates how various aspects of reality are constructed, including the body, emotion, gender, sexualities, race and ethnicity, medical knowledge, therapy, and history. The sixth and final section offers eight chapters that take up continuing concerns and challenges to social constructionist studies raised in, for example, feminist, postcolonial and cultural studies.

From my point of view as a teacher of philosophical and methodological issues in social science research this book is invaluable as a guide to the literature and as a comprehensive treatment of the many ways in which the perspective of social constructionism is practically treated as a social research process as well as conceived as both an epistemology and theory of research. From my point of view as a teacher of evaluation theory and issues shaping the field and its applications, I found several particular chapters highly relevant. For example, Dalvir Samra-Fredericks' chapter "Social Constructionism in Management and Organizational Studies" illustrates the use of social constructionist approaches to understand the complex ways in which members of an organization go about doing the work of organizing, leading, and managing. To my way of thinking at least, the chapter suggests fruitful ground for exploring how an organization's members go about doing the work of 'evaluating.' Anne Schneider and Helen Ingram's chapter "Social Constructions in the Study of Public Policy" explores how social constructions of target populations (beneficiaries) are used, manipulated, reproduced, and modified in the policymaking process as well as how policies and policy

designs carry messages that are interpreted by people in everyday life. The chapter thus helps evaluators who work in the policy arena better understand how 'policy' is actually accomplished. In light of the broad interest in culturally competent evaluation, I found Mitch Berbrier's chapter "The Diverse Construction of Race and Ethnicity" a highly useful resource in understanding how meanings of how these too often-taken-for-granted categories are constructed. Finally, Kathleen Lowney's chapter "Claimsmaking, Culture, and the Media in the Social Construction Process" is a very insightful discussion of how troublesome social conditions become constructed as social problems in the interplay between culture, the practices of claimsmaking, and media stories. Given that evaluators often deal with high profile projects championed by a funder as a solution of sorts to a social problem, this is enlightening reading.

Although I have authored chapters in other handbooks (self-disclosure), I generally am not a big fan of such volumes that address complex and dynamic topics in the social sciences for they often do not provide a comprehensive enough view of the subject matter and there is high risk that the contents will be superseded in several years. This *Handbook* is an exception. Gubrium and Holstein have assembled and organized an impressive volume that will serve as guide both to current thinking in this arena and to what is likely to come.