



Social Constructionism Now More Than Ever: Following the Hermeneutic Money Trail in a Post-Truth World

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In the summer of 2017, at the annual meetings of the Society for the Study of Social Problems, I had the great privilege of organizing two very special critical dialogue sessions centered on both the origins of social constructionism, as well as future directions. The year marked the 40th anniversary of the publication of Spector and Kitsuse's (1977) landmark *Constructing Social Problems* (herein *CSP*). This special issue of *The American Sociologist* presents some of the key papers presented at these sessions, which included many well-seasoned experts who have contributed to constructionism since the publication of *CSP*, including Malcolm Spector himself, as well as several relatively junior scholars who are at the vanguard of new directions and advances – both empirical and theoretical – of constructionism going forward.

Since the conference took place in Montreal, a particularly apt Leonard Cohen quote came to my mind (who grew up in Montreal and remains closely affiliated with it), which I decided to recite while opening the first session, which I chaired. The lines come from Cohen's song *The Future*, off the album of the same name:

Things are gonna slide / slide in all directions
Won't be nothing / nothing you can measure anymore
The blizzard / the blizzard of the world has crossed the threshold
And it's overturned the order of the soul

The lyrics can be interpreted in a number of ways, but seems to aptly project today's general 'post-truth' climate (where 'nothing can be measured anymore'), replete with 'alternative facts' and algorithmically-driven news feeds on social media. As part of the contemporary societal malaise, particularly concentrated in the United States following the election of Donald Trump, the passage may also link to attacks on journalism, academia and academic knowledge. On a wider global scale there is appears to be a

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surge in authoritarian state power, extreme forms of nationalism and xenophobia, associated also with radicalism, polarization and animosity (Diamond et al. 2016; Giroux 2017; Hobolt 2016). Given this zeitgeist, sociology and the knowledge it produces is particularly fragile, especially if the knowledge produced through sociological research is easily dismissed as ideologically driven propaganda emanating from ‘the far left’, or irrelevant ‘relativist’ musings projected from the ivory tower.

It makes eminent sense, then, for sociologists, and scientists across all disciplines, to proceed with caution and conduct carefully crafted examinations that help to produce reliable, valid and reproducible knowledge which responds to Cohen’s ‘blizzard’ on crucial issues and social problems such as global warming, immigration, and widening gaps in structured inequalities, among others. Many of us inspired by sociology come to embrace the insights that accrue from the development of a sociological imagination (Mills 1959), giving us both the knowledge and tools to take action. Social activism seems braided to the very essence of sociology, and concomitantly, to the various inspiring forms of activism arising from the #metoo and #timesup awareness networks, among others (cf. Glaser and Strauss 1964). In this moment, then, given the pressures sociology is facing, we must expect calls for emboldening its theoretical and epistemological armament; to ready itself for combat against the social forces that set themselves against the sociological, given that to ‘commit sociology’ is, in this politically charged moment, seen as ideological folly and one more permutation of false knowledge (Kay and Beland 2014; Singh 2014). Searching for the rational, the objective, and the valid in such a climate seems not only prudent but essential. This is certainly the charge of ‘professional sociology’ as defined by Burawoy (2005).

40 years before this moment, *CSP* stridently declared itself in opposition to normative, professional sociology, with the striking remark on the 1st page: “there is not and never has been a sociology of social problems” (Spector and Kitsuse 1977: 1). Spector and Kitsuse challenged the normative (specifically structural functionalist) frameworks that social problems up to then were studied in sociology. But what of the legacy of *CSP* today? What do some of constructionism’s most luminary figures have to say about its impact? The contributors to this special issue explicate the various contributions of the perspective, and some of the challenges it has faced over the decades, including the critiques which have emerged within constructionist circles, as well as those from without. I proceed by highlighting these contributions, before turning to the broader question of what all this means given the general assault on sociological knowledge today noted above.

Reflections and Reminders

This special issue begins with Malcolm Spector’s own reflections on the 40 years since the publication of *CSP*. Spector offers a candid glance at the mentoring role John Kitsuse played to Spector, and how they came to work together to develop the framework of social constructionism. Spector highlights Kitsuse’s intellectual style and work within the ‘societal reaction’ approaches popular during the 1960s and 1970s (e.g., the work of Howard Becker and Edwin Lemert) including a rejection of a “balanced approach”, opting instead for an approach which did “not compromise” and “try to make everyone happy”. Spector notes his admiration for Woolgar and

Pawluch's influential article *ontological gerrymandering* (Woolgar and Pawluch 1985), which raised epistemological questions about whether it is possible to avoid introducing objective assumptions into the analysis. Spector argues that Woolgar and Pawluch were making a point that "was essentially philosophical," but adds "we are not philosophers." Spector reveals he is less concerned about whether the junior (i.e., untenured) constructionist scholars of today employ a 'strict' or 'contextual' stance (see Rafter 1992; Troyer 1992), so long as they do not center their analyses on the "causes of the conditions." Spector ends his article with some prescient advice for junior scholars taking up empirical constructionist research.

Claimsmaking discourses are fundamentally *moral* discourses, and constitute "social problems as moral action". This is a central insight ushered forth in Joseph Schneider's contribution to this special issue. His aim is to retrace some of Spector and Kitsuse's foundational arguments in order to 'double down' on the importance of an approach which takes seriously the notion that "social problems are what people think they are". Schneider highlights the symbolic interactionist and ethnomethodological influences on social constructionism, especially from Steven Woolgar, who drew (partly from his collaborations with Bruno Latour), an appreciation for the sociological significance of relativism. Social constructionists' 'core' "non-negotiable claim," Schneider pinpoints: "no claims-making, no social problems. Full stop." (As an aside, Tony Christensen's article in this special issue picks up on this very point). Due to constructionism's focus on *moral* discourses, Schneider argues a "selective agnosticism" is required, whereby "the sociologist cannot use their own personal morality or ideology to identify conditions as problems." Social constructionists are certainly not *amoral* and *agnostic* to social problems in their everyday lives (see Dorothy Pawluch's article in this special issue), but while conducting their research they should be, he argues, agnostic to the claims themselves. Schneider is aware of the challenges this poses in the present political climate of – especially – the United States. This approach may well be perceived as undercutting sociologists as experts on social conditions and how to best ameliorate them. Indeed, it "brings the social scientist under analytical scrutiny". Yet this approach is singular and prescient insofar as it centers on, Schneider lucidly articulates, "a very particular ontological indifference with respect not to what exists but rather to what their theory warrants as relevant data; which is to say, definitional activities." This does not "weaken" sociological knowledge, but rather "the point is to acknowledge the put-together and relative nature of all claims such that the very practices of that making are themselves available for scrutiny." Drawing from Latour, and insightfully animating his advocacy of selectively agnostic constructionist research, Schneider observes "the more constructed, the more real."

Another contemporary of Kitsuse, Peter Ibarra, contributes an article geared to providing advice to constructionist scholars on how to hone their craft. Ibarra was Kitsuse's former student and later collaborator, contributing to the debates revolving around ontological gerrymandering and 'strict' versus 'contextual' constructionism (e.g., Ibarra and Kitsuse 2003). Ibarra underscores Kitsuse's advocacy of fieldwork-based research, the importance of tracing "how claims travel across institutionalized spaces, thereby connecting texts to their auspices," and the significance of theorizing the social processes associated with claimsmaking, rather than the social conditions under examination. He remarks on the need for continual reflexivity during the course of research and, perhaps

most unpredictably, why constructionist analysts should “cultivate a sense of the absurd.” The paper proceeds to explicate each of these points in turn. Scholars who are ‘cutting their teeth’ with a constructionist project, such as graduate students or even seasoned sociologists taking up a constructionist study for the first time, will find useful Ibarra recalling what it was like to discuss constructionism with Kitsuse, including the sort of ‘general scope’ questions Kitsuse would be known to ask his students. These are questions readers are encouraged to ask themselves to help develop stronger empirical and theoretical directions of analysis. Perhaps ironically, given some – such as Spector, this issue – who critique Ibarra and Kitsuse’s later work as advocating a focus too centered on solely the discursive (see Ibarra and Kitsuse 1993, 2003), Ibarra highlights Kitsuse’s encouragement for the collection of multiple sources of content (a “variegated... social problems process” (Ibarra and Kitsuse 1993)), especially ethnographic research, in order to better situate the context of claimsmaking under examination (see also Ibarra and Adorjan 2018 for further discussion of Kitsuse’s sense of the importance of social context for constructionist analyses). Ibarra also highlights the argument that constructionism, while often focused on ‘successful’ claims, also has the potential to examine social processes of failure (or contestation), an argument which also resonates with Tony Christensen’s article in this issue.

Dorothy Pawluch’s contribution centers on a reminder of the strengths of Spector and Kitsuse’s vision of a *sociology of social problems*, not *conditions*. She recognizes both the professional and personal challenges with positioning oneself as a constructionist scholar today, especially given academic reproaches in traditionally receptive associations such as the Society for the Study of Social Problems. She also refers to challenges based on pressures to engage in social activism and ‘public sociology’. The stress placed upon sociology to ‘batten down the positivist hatches’ comes from all directions (arguments I revisit myself below), and it is no wonder that sociological research has widely become synonymous with research on inequality. Pawluch refers to Harris (2006), who observes that sociology’s “preoccupation with inequality has permeated virtually all subfields of the discipline.” She places these challenges in relation to a wider backdrop of controversies regarding the university’s role in wider society, both in terms of public engagement and outreach (again, ‘public sociology’) and engagement in ‘social justice’. Significantly, she highlights how many publics do, in fact, embrace constructionist insights despite knowledge produced ‘on the sidelines’ in relation to truth claims; she also draws attention to how calls for freedom of expression on university campuses and calls for universities to teach *how* to think not just *what* to think are, perhaps, in line with constructionism’s call for agnostic analyses pinpointing social processes through which both words and actions are embroiled. Pawluch’s article proceeds by making a call for constructionists to reaffirm their commitments to a constructionist research agenda that is emboldened against the “current *zeitgeist* in sociology departments and on university campuses,” but also does not place in the rear view mirror the important epistemological debates which took place in the 1980s and 1990s. Reviewing these debates in detail, she suggests not a single ‘holy’ way forward, but simply argues constructionist scholars should be aware of the analytical choices they make and their implications. The original sorts of ‘what’ and ‘how’ questions that Spector and Kitsuse espoused

are far from exhausted, she argues. We are only beginning to realize the breadth of our questions.

Joel Best's article takes stock of the 'internal' debates within constructionist circles since the publication of *CSP*, but also acknowledges some of the more recent critiques external to the paradigm. He begins by acknowledging the influence *CSP* had in the late 1970s, but argues that, given developments in the four decades since the book's publication, placing too much emphasis on the origin of *CSP* "would come at a cost". *CSP*, he reminds us, illuminated a need at the time for the case study method, which produced a series of important empirical 'natural histories' of social problems. Nevertheless, constructionism risks devolving into internally-centric epistemological essays, he argues, unless it can push beyond case studies and develop theory related to the social processes that can be examined comparatively across individual cases (Best 2015). Best also refers to what inspired his term 'strict constructionism' and underscores his long-standing advocacy of the 'contextual' approach to constructionism (e.g., Best 1993), based on his position that "it [is] impossible to conduct research that would meet the standards of a strong, strict constructionist reading." His paper draws from an interesting and applicable bumblebee analogy, arguing that despite these unresolvable epistemological dilemmas, constructionists have pursued fruitful empirical research; one with an international scope. Even though these studies continue to, unavoidably, produce 'ontological gerrymandering', Best centers on an insight that sociological analysis devoid of context (implying strict constructionism) ceases to remain sociological, if sociology's domain of expertise is the explication of social context and its relevance to social life. Best's paper is also unique among the contributors here, as he then turns to criticisms 'from the outside' (external to constructionism), that continue to challenge the utility of social constructionism. He highlights the recent critiques by Dello Buono (2013, 2015), previous President of the Society for the Study of Social Problems, who argues from a conflict-theory lens that constructionism fails to acknowledge the objective facticity of capitalism and the need to synthesize this to reinvigorate constructionism and make it politically relevant for activism. I return to Dello Buono's arguments below. Best writes "one can imagine a set of analogous calls for moving beyond social constructionism from analysts favoring other ideologies—say, conservatism, feminism, or fundamentalism." His argument is, rather than synthesizing or incorporating the assumptions (e.g., regarding power) of such approaches, constructionist scholars should focus on strengthening constructionism itself. He encourages constructionists to ask themselves 'so what' questions pertaining to new empirical studies, which he argues need to go beyond merely another social construction of 'X'. Best's own work has examined the processes that occur when claimsmaking spreads around the world, contributing knowledge to the global scope of claimsmaking activities and the social processes animating them (Best 2001b).¹

Amir Marvasti's contribution encourages constructionists to "have a better appreciation of the diversity of constructionist thought and its research practices," through an overview of the various ways "words" and "numbers" are employed in constructionist

¹ A recent special issue of *Qualitative Sociological Review* (2015, XI(2)) also includes new empirical studies and theoretical directions (including constructionist examinations outside the Anglo Global North, cyberspace and 'big data'), indicating the continued vibrancy of new scholarship.

research. Rather than asking constructionists to position themselves as either ‘strict’ or ‘contextual’ constructionists, he argues that the analytical framework is contingent upon the questions being asked. He begins by problematizing the assumption that constructionist research is necessarily qualitative, and highlighting the varying reasons constructionists may be drawn to qualitative methods. The careful tracking of subjective interpretations and the explication of ‘lived experiences’ remains arguably central, primarily through interviews, discourse analysis or ethnography. These approaches center on the ‘whats’ and ‘hows’ of claims-making activities and processes. Words, his paper shows, can be used as constructive of social conditions, including people, morality and emotion (Loseke 1999), and words can also be “reflexively connected with concrete conditions” (Gubrium and Holstein 1997).

Marvasti then turns to the use of numbers in constructionist research. ‘Strict constructionists’, for instance, usually opt not to challenge “the accuracy of numbers but understanding how they are constructed and used, particularly in institutional setting”. Some constructionists employ numbers to establish causal relations – here asking ‘why’ questions, seeking to go beyond ‘how’ and ‘what’. Others seek to use numbers to “establish fallacies” and unwarranted societal responses to social problems. For some, Marvasti writes,

causal analysis and inferential statistics are not inherently antithetical to the project of constructionism. Namely, it would be worth knowing not just *how* but *why* (i.e., as a result of what social conditions) X changed into Y.

While Marvasti recognizes that ‘mixed methods’ approaches are often criticized for combining antithetical epistemological assumptions and even questions, his paper effectively advocates for eclecticism in constructionist scholarship going forward. The paper projects a broader argument: constructionists should be free to ask the questions they wish, and make methodological choices in line with these questions, rather than preconceived judgements applied to qualitative or quantitative, nor ‘strict’ or ‘contextual’ approaches.

Jared Del Rosso’s article also contributes ideas towards advancing constructionist analysis, which can be seen as another approach to extending beyond case study methodology. Del Rosso, drawing from Bruno Latour, advocates going beyond claimsmaking to “social problems chains”. This he defines as “sites of social problems activities *connected by objectified forms of social problems*, such as social problem categories inscribed in texts or constructions of the reality of a problem” (my emphasis). From the stability and mobility afforded by these objectified sites, constructionists, Del Rosso argues, should trace how they connect to other social problems sites (i.e., social problems chains), examining the resources these other sites do or do not provide. Del Rosso’s account aims to help develop social problems theory to account for, in essence, the various permutations of power involved in social problems processes. His goal is to “expand our sense of how and of what problems are made.” He underscores a particular problem sometimes identified in constructionism: that constructionists are unable to distinguish between very different sorts of claims, especially if one is unilaterally agnostic to the claims under scrutiny. Surely constructionists would acknowledge the differences between claims to satanic cults versus HIV/AIDS in the 1980s, he asks rhetorically. One solution to “better distinguish among problems”, Del

Rosso argues, is to “diversify our analytic vocabulary, so we may better account for the myriad of things that are part and parcel of social problems activities.” He advocates pushing beyond the ‘merely’ discursive to include ethnographic observation of social problems claimsmaking and ‘chains’ (see also Ibarra and Adorjan 2018, and Christensen, this issue). Included in this is the physical materiality relevant to claims makers, which produces the contexts they draw from when articulating concerns about social problems (Del Rosso uses the example of U.S. torture (see also Rosso 2011, 2014)). He writes: “social problems theorists must be the most nimble of constructionists, recognizing the panoply of instruments and materials that claims-makers employ.” Significantly, he acknowledges that this more eclectic incorporation of material conditions relevant to claimsmakers is still not amenable to assessments of *validity* by analysts (i.e., which claims and chains are more ‘correct’, factually or morally, than others). He argues that such questions remain “beyond the horizon of the constructionist study. Rather, by revealing the different activities, instruments, and materials making up those chains, our studies *may better enable others to assess differences among claims*” (my emphasis). Del Rosso concludes by explicating some methodological challenges implementing such a constructionist project.

Optimistically, Sara Crawley lucidly articulates in her contribution to this special issue, while social construction has become politically irrelevant, it has much potential to address *power*, especially by paying much greater attention to material conditions (here her arguments resonate with both Del Rosso and Christensen, this issue). “The value of constructionist perspectives is in seeing *social relations* as variable and socially organized,” she argues, “rather than as transhistorical, natural conditions,”; and notes that “exploring social relations exposes relations of power.” Crawley argues that constructionism suffers from “epistemological encampment”, involving “a tendency to view only one’s own epistemological leanings as valid,” and resulting in a neglect of the wider ‘so what’ question regarding the knowledge produced by constructionist research. Rather, she advocates for “epistemic gain” involving “what sociologists might learn if we use epistemologies as provisional tools for seeing the social world.” Indeed, resonating well with Christensen’s article in this issue, Crawley argues “empirical research not carefully grounded in theory and epistemology will be driven by *unacknowledged and unexamined assumptions*.” Part of the problem is (arguably willful) ignorance of *material conditions*, especially in ‘strict’ forms of constructionism that do not attend to material context outside of member’s claimsmaking. What analytical purity sacrifices, she underscores, is practical relevance to non-academic audiences, especially social activists; and especially in today’s politically charged zeitgeist. Moreover, she argues, constructionism cannot avoid reference to material conditions even if it desires to do so (suggesting the critique of ‘ontological gerrymandering’ (Woolgar and Pawluch 1985)). It is “too great a price” to “unsanction” consideration of “power, equity, and human suffering,” Crawley argues, resonating also with Christensen’s call this issue for a more central consideration of inequalities. One way forward may be to combine multiple “epistemological strategies” in one project. By this she does not refer to multi-method research, but a “*multi-epistemology*” approach. The goal here is “not truth-seeking but *to see what we can learn* from viewing a problem via various analytical strategies.” Crawley is not alone in this issue in raising challenging and provocative questions. She does, however, remind us that current debates, including discussions as the 2017 SSSP conference, only rehash

– arguably unproductively so – an older set of debates on revitalizing social constructionism from the early 1990s (Holstein and Miller 1993). Crawley’s proposals are geared to (re)ignite a more inclusive constructionist imagination that avoids further siloing of sociological approaches to the study of social problems.

In his article, Tony Christensen takes up the call for a more inclusive approach by including consideration of the voices of marginalized claims-makers; what Miller (1993) dubs ‘claims from the underside’. This may at first seem counter-intuitive, as constructionists are usually drawn to those claimsmakers, Christensen argues, with the power to broadcast their views (who he dubs ‘top dog’ claimsmakers), and have them taken up by institutions and organizations who champion for their cause. He writes “the social problems game, like all other social processes, is a rigged game that reflects the inequalities found in the broader social context in which it is played.” He thus wonders why “constructionists have paid little attention to unpacking how the game is rigged and the consequences of that rigging for how social problems claims are articulated.” The answer lies, Christensen argues, in latent assumptions found in constructionist examinations of social problems which, if rendered more manifest, would reveal serious omissions in how claimsmaking is analyzed. Relatedly, fundamental questions become problematized such as *what is a claim*, and *how do we recognize a claim*? Turning constructionist concepts inward, he suggests that constructionists too often rest on their own ‘formula stories’ about what claimsmaking looks like, centering on “those who likely benefit from various forms of privilege and power.” A major argument here is that “there is a strangely generalized assumption that recognition by official organizations will be desired by claimsmakers, that those organizations themselves are viewed as legitimate and respectable by audiences and that claimsmakers measure success in terms of institutional response.” Indeed, Christensen argues, claimsmakers in a position of distrust against key institutions (the police is one example given) are not likely to pursue ‘policy making’ with them as a key stage of the ‘natural history’ model often highlighted in constructionist scholarship. Further, assumptions regarding the democratic contexts within which claims are produced undercuts the visibility of social problems “black markets”.

Several intriguing questions may be asked here, including “How does a state with influence or a monopoly over the media change the social problems game? How do we conceptualize violence and intimidation as a form of claimsmaking or counter-claimsmaking? How do non-state claimsmakers go about making and propagating claims in an environment where speaking out publicly carries a risk of punishment?” While Christensen’s arguments naturally suggest enlarging the scope of constructionist research beyond western, liberal democracies, an important aspect of his arguments highlights the importance of also addressing unacknowledged limitations and expanding the analytical scope of scholarship in the Anglo-Global North. A widened epistemological scope is well suited to Christensen’s goals. Here he calls on constructionists to move beyond ‘words’ alone, especially for those without discursive access to ‘appropriate’ claimsmaking channels. Claimsmaking can take a number of different forms, including visual imagery (perhaps online ‘memes’ as symbols of social protest). Social constructionists, as with scholars in general, are academics working in a discursive medium, through which the draw to discourse is obviated. This, however risks a confirmation bias linked to constructionists’ inductively-geared approaches. Yet there may be fruitful avenues of research involving the extra-discursive, Christensen

argues, especially for those marginalized from the resources to engage the (formal) discursive social problems process. At root, his paper pushes considerations of power to the forefront of constructionist analyses of social problems, challenging others to produce constructionist research that is arguably more relevant in today's post-truth era.

Jun Ayukawa and Manabu Akagawa contribute articles that raise questions of how the social problems process may or may not be different than the North American model developed by Spector and Kitsuse. Both Ayukawa and Akagawa contribute articles centered on social problems processes in Japan. Given John Kitsuse's own Japanese heritage, it is not surprising that a strong constructionist influence remains there (e.g., Akagawa 2015; Ayukawa 2000; Nakagawa 1995). Ayukawa's chapter, in particular, focuses on claimsmaking regarding the death penalty in Japan. Japan retains the death penalty, yet is beholden to international conventions on human rights that set both warrants or grounds for social problems (Best 1990). Ayukawa makes comparisons with the United States, arguing that despite both nations upholding the death penalty (and in opposition to international trends of abolishment or at least not applying it), it is too simplistic to examine the claimsmaking processes in Japan in the same way as the United States. He argues that "although the Japanese government refers to international treaties and covenants in regard to many issues, it is less enthusiastic about promoting international covenants on human rights." Despite this, reformers such as civil rights groups and the Japanese Federation of Bar Associations draw from international conventions (e.g., from the United Nations) which provide legitimacy based on the warrants or grounds they discursively provide. Ayukawa observes that "even though both of Japan and [the United States] ratified the international covenants on civil and political rights, such references to international consensus are much more common in social problems rhetoric Japan, than in the U.S.." Claimsmakers in support of abolishment, however, face challenges based on the context of governance in Japan. Obstacles include a Human Rights Bureau which is under the influence of the Ministry of Justice (the latter which does not favor abolishment); and the influence of victims of crime, who, drawing from emotions discourses (Loseke and Kusenbach 2008), are having a discernable impact on public opinion, influencing a wave of support for capital punishment. Here Japanese politicians appear to be under the same populist pressures as in European and North American nations. Ayukawa writes "a politician who advocates the abolition of the death penalty cannot expect to win votes; in fact, politicians do not speak about the issue during election time."

Clearly there are some similarities, as well as differences, when considering the national context of social problems claimsmaking in Japan. Ayukawa posits "the lawyers and other people who strive for the abolition of the death penalty invoke and emphasize universal values. On the other hand, the opinion leaders and the people who support the death penalty believe in the traditional, domestic values of Japan, and refuse to be compromised by European cultural values." While globalization influences how claims spread internationally (Best 2001b), Ayukawa concludes that constructionist studies need to be attuned to "fit local conditions." Borrowing concepts from outside constructionism, I argue that constructionism here can be advanced by paying closer attention to the 'glocalization' of claimsmaking (Bauman 1998), and how global discourses and trends come into *friction* with local exigencies and awareness contexts (Glaser and Strauss 1964; Tsing 2005).

Manabu Akagawa contributes a natural history, drawing from Foucaultian discourse analysis, of the putative low birth rate problem in Japan. The paper effectively highlights the intersections of global trends in gender equality as well as localized issues and interpretations, thus making it another good exemplar of how constructionism informed by varying national contexts outside of the Anglo-Global North can help produce important comparative knowledge. Akagawa highlights debates and policy responses aimed at ameliorating Japan's low birth rate, showing how some were embraced while others rejected. He wishes to examine the 'whats' and 'hows' of this debate but also ask 'why' questions, such as "why the policies which were adopted tend to favor two-income families?" His natural history covers seven key events between 1990 to 2016 in order to explain why policies favoring social welfare for working couples were favored over others. Interestingly, what began in a 'top down' manner, with the Welfare Ministry announcing in June 1990 a low Japanese birth rate of 1.57 (which became known as the "1.57 shock"), the natural history reveals responses and discord generated from multiple claimsmakers, including government officials, academics, national newspaper journalists, but also bloggers and everyday citizens. Government officials making arguments that declining birth rates are caused by women's higher education became, for instance, "severely criticized" by others, including female journalists. Akagawa suggests that international discourses of human rights and gender equality affect how such claims are responded to. Similar to Ayukawa's highlighting of how international discourses come to factor on localized debates, Akagawa centers on contention over statistical data that show, for particular claimsmakers, that 'advanced' countries such as Sweden, France and the United States demonstrate a link between higher female labor participation and total fertility rates. Others, however, critiqued these statistical trends in a particular 'stat war' over how to interpret the numbers (Best 2001a, 2004). In comparison to Ayukawa's emphasis on the role public opinion has influencing populist responses to the death penalty, Akagawa's paper shows how popular opinion regarding the *economic* origins of Japan's low birth were "ignored" by "bureaucrats and business managers". Proposed policies such as having an increase to the available child allowance were also rejected given local exigencies such as the "Great East Japanese Earthquake", which directed financial efforts towards recovery. Also, while the role of the internet does not factor heavily in Akagawa's natural history, he highlights the ripple effects of one 'viral' blog post: "'My child wasn't accepted for nursery school. Die, Japan!!'" This post was circulated by traditional news media and initially rejected by Prime Minister Shinzo Abe (arguing the anonymous post could not be verified) but quickly seemed to backtrack and respond that the government is pushing for reducing child-care wait list times.

Akagawa's incorporation of Foucault permits some interesting observations about not just how these debates are framed, but what is 'unsaid' and 'unsayable' given the frames invoked. For instance, he argues "few claims discuss the merit of low birth rates, such as the possibilities they might solve the traffic congestion problem in urban cities, amelioration of resources, and environmental problems, allowing people to live in larger and less expensive houses." Moreover, the focus of solutions on gender-equality and work-life balance offsets consideration of the impact of younger people postponing marriage. Akagawa makes a strong case for asking 'why' questions, which help move "beyond case studies" as some have argued is necessary moving forward (Best 2015; see also Dorothy Pawluch's article this issue).

This issue is a clarion call for studies instilling a constructionist imagination regarding social problems. The articles in this special issue of *The American Sociologist* do not present easy paths forward. Indeed, there are challenges still to face and choices still to make (Holstein and Miller 2003). What is clear is that a critical mass of constructionist scholars remains highly engaged and inspired to produce significant and vital knowledge, informed by novel questions and directions.

The Politics of Being Apolitical

The bold dismissal of structural functionalist and other normative perspectives on social problems, geared to distinguish constructionism from other sociological approaches in the late 1970s, may be received as more divisive today than ever before. Constructionism, some may argue, is willfully and flagrantly guilty of indifference to the social problems it examines; charged with being apolitical at a time when sides need to be drawn, more than ever. One of the more erudite recent critiques from outside constructionist circles, as mentioned above, is from R.A. Dello Buono, who charges constructionism with being “overly subjective” (Dello Buono 2013: 795), and advocates its “re-link with the material and structural elements of 21st century capitalist crises” (ibid.). It is worth examining Dello Buono’s arguments in further detail, as they are particularly well presented and can be taken as representative of, as Joel Best comments this issue, the critiques that come from those (conflict or Critical) scholars grappling with how to respond to the structural inequalities shaped by hyper-capitalism and neoliberalism, and exacerbated by the geopolitics of today’s authoritarian global climate. The agnostic or ‘apolitical’ approach to constructionism – whether ‘strict’ or ‘contextual’ – is rejected by Dello Buono as it offers merely “ephemeral and politically-bracketed analyses” which leads to “political irrelevance” (ibid.). He argues this approach requires displacement in favor of an “insurgent attitude” which would produce “a more powerful synthesis of social problems inquiry” (Dello Buono 2013: 795, 796). In his more recent Presidential Address to the SSSP, Dello Buono (2015) raised similar arguments, underscoring the incompatibility of social constructionism to “social activism” (Dello Buono 2015: 331, see also Agger 1993), and advocating for greater linkages between “scholar activists” and “popular movements”. Indeed, here Dello Buono is centrally interested in the implications of a critically-infused constructionism informing “social movements activists” (ibid., p. 332–333). Dello Buono continues: “social constructionism tends to freeze the historical moment of the larger political economy in a way that takes our eye off the big moving ball” (ibid., p. 335).

Before I offer my rejoinder, I should declare at the outset that I admire the call for increased activism and agree that we are in a particularly precarious time when sociology as a whole is being systematically attacked and the knowledge it produces dismissed. Personally, I have always found inspirational Antonio Gramsci’s famous invective against the indifferent. He wrote in 1917: “I hate the indifferent. I believe that living means taking sides. Those who really live cannot help being a citizen and a partisan. Indifference and apathy are parasitism, perversion, not life. That is why I hate the indifferent” (see Tiso 2018). And yet my response here is that social constructionism offers invaluable knowledge regarding social processes related to

social problems that are needed today, perhaps more than ever before. These social processes involve, in many respects, examinations of power, yet pay careful attention to the nuanced and often unpredictable forms power takes. We may say *power is as power does*, and constructionism's conscious apolitical lens is its greatest strength, not its intractable weakness. This is especially apt when examining attributions of 'fake news' and 'alternative facts'. While it is tempting to ask questions such as why some people believe in the 'wrong facts' (cf. Glassner 1999), rather than gearing analysis to 'debunking' such claims, constructionism offers the potential to unpack how such claims making operates in particular contexts and adheres closely to *member's perspectives* (Gubrium and Holstein 2011; Pollner 1987).

Dello Buono (ibid., p. 339) accuses constructionism simultaneously of its "tendency towards reification in a way that neglects human agency, leading to the oversimplification of collective action," while elsewhere critiquing the notion that "the constructionist process was free to be delightfully filled with unrestrained human agency as a response to the establishment" (ibid., p. 333). Yet constructionist studies place human agency as an empirical question for analysis in relation to the contexts that are meaningful for the members themselves. In addition, the various sorts of claimsmaking activities and "chains" (see Del Rosso, this issue) constructionists consider do include social activism and social movements, but as Spector notes in his article this issue, "looking back, some of our key concepts may seem dated. Our central concept, claimsmaking activities, and the image that the claimant is a member of, or spokesperson for, a social movement organization, now seems slightly archaic or out of date." Constructionists now attend to the influence and impact of social media and the mediation of online spaces for claimsmaking (Adorjan and Yau 2015; Maratea 2014, 2015), and also claimsmaking processes that are not successful (the "nonproblem"), or claimsmaking that occurs despite a lack of agency (Miller 1993, Kitsuse 1980, Ball and Lilly 1984; see also Christensen, this issue). These approaches are particularly well geared to examine attributions of non-agency (Adorjan et al. 2012); for instance, in cases where 'alternative facts' are contested – we need to know much more about how these processes operate. I argue that we can do this best when we set aside assumptions of normative social structure and explore how social structure is both experienced and acted upon.

As highlighted above, Best's argument is also to strengthen constructionism by extending its empirical and theoretical scope, especially away from case studies that do not build upon each other. Ibarra also offers some remarks towards the question of social activism. In his article this issue, he discusses the original impetus inspiring many students of sociology who are "interested in righting certain wrongs," but reinforces Kitsuse's view that constructionist analysts should avoid "substituting [their] own definitions, claims, and assumptions for those of the members". Significantly, Ibarra is sympathetic to the call for 'righting wrongs' and social activism (see footnote iii in his article). He argues it "is certainly not to say that the other kinds of questions—about warrant and objectivity—are unimportant, but only that they are beyond the purview of constructionism as Kitsuse understood it." Of course, allegiance to Spector and Kitsuse is one of the issues under contention in this special issue. Some call on a greater focus on material conditions that *mediate* experience and produce certain forms

of claimsmaking (see Crawley and Del Rosso, this issue). Some call for greater emphasis on multimethod approaches (Marvasti) while others advocate for ‘multi-epistemic’ projects (Crawley) that aim to synthesize knowledge from ‘traditional’ constructionist studies with approaches that foreground the role of power in structuring claimsmakers’ positions in society.

My view is that critical approaches have much to *benefit* from the insights social constructionism provides, offering situated knowledge to better contextualize analytical focuses on wider social systems (e.g., hypercapitalism, neoliberalism). Likewise, *constructionism* may benefit from considering how critical approaches help problematize questions of how we identify claimsmaking activities and consider those positioned subaltern to power and privilege. This requires thinking through both the material conditions that mediate social problems claimsmaking and the very form claimsmaking takes. It may be that subaltern positioning is mediated by wider normative social structures, but knowledge is still needed regarding how this is experienced and responded to. We still have many fascinating ‘what’ and ‘how’ questions to pursue (see especially Pawluch’s article this issue). I argue that constructionism’s selective agnosticism (using Schneider’s term) helps produce important knowledge regarding how people understand and respond to social problems; knowledge not ‘better’ or ‘more true’ but simply different than that produced by critical approaches given different epistemological lenses. This is not to suggest that constructionist studies have nothing to learn from these approaches in expanding their empirical focus and theoretical toolkit. It is, however, also important to consider that sociological relevancy is not solely a product of political relevancy. That said, while single studies that aim to synthesize ostensibly disparate epistemological and theoretical approaches will likely encounter difficulties, it is worth pursuing whether *constructionist alliances* with other approaches in sociology can help engender in a reflexive way knowledge that is more likely to be relevant for broader publics. Many constructionists who are agnostic to the social problems in their analyses are nevertheless likely to be politically left-wing in their personal values, including their inclinations towards activism (see Pawluch’s article this issue). There is important work to be done, sides to choose, actions to take, all of which can be informed by constructionist analyses, but which may not be analytically relevant for constructionist studies themselves.

The challenges most crudely characterized as ‘subjectivism’ versus ‘objectivism’ are not unique to constructionism; indeed, they are longstanding in sociology. Even in their classic work on the social construction of reality, Berger and Luckmann (1966) divided their discussion between society as objective reality and subjective reality. While both sections were written lucidly and with resplendent insight, it is hard to conceive how an empirical research program would proceed by synthesizing both aspects. As sociologists we examine the same world but our theoretical lenses focus on different aspects of it. The challenge lies in findings value in our inquiries based on the choices we make going forward.

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