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CHAPTER 19

Constructionist Impulses in Ethnographic Fieldwork

● **James A. Holstein**
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Across sociology, anthropology, and other disciplines with observational traditions, the common thread running through ethnographic fieldwork is the empirical scrutiny of social situations *in vivo*. Whether sited in households, in small groups, on street corners, in villages, or distributed within organizations and societies, the fieldworker capitalizes on being immersed in a social situation to study its social practices (Bernard, 1998). If, for some, ethnography has become synonymous with qualitative methods (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994), its traditional method of *in situ* participant observation remains a distinguishing and accepted source of empirical material and analytic inspiration throughout the social sciences.

A long-standing interest in the realistic representation of lives and experience has

shaped ethnographic fieldwork into a predominantly naturalistic endeavor, aimed at documenting social worlds and their subjective meanings. Recently, constructionist impulses have captivated the enterprise, altering the goal from naturalistic representation to understanding the indigenous organization of representational practices. Questions arise regarding the sited “thereness” of naturalistic inquiry, prompting epistemological concerns associated with the “being there” assumption of traditional ethnographic fieldwork (Geertz, 1988). How is “there” constructed as a field of inquiry? From what does the field’s organization derive? What are the practices and conditions that shape the construction process?

The aim of this chapter is to highlight the ways in which ethnographic fieldwork can be transformed by constructionist sensibili-

ties, focusing mainly on modes of conceptualizing the field, collecting empirical material, and analyzing data. The chapter is less concerned with the writing of ethnography or ethnographic representation; that issue, by now, has had a vibrant history of debate across the social sciences, especially in anthropology and sociology (see, e.g., Behar, 1996; Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Clough, 1992; Ellis & Bochner, 1996; Fox, 1991; Geertz, 1988; Goodall, 2000; Rosaldo, 1993; Tedlock, 2000, 2004; Van Maanen, 1988, 1995; see also Amit, Chapter 39; Ellingson & Ellis, Chapter 23; Faubion & Marcus, Chapter 4; and J. Schneider, Chapter 38, all in this volume). We are well aware that procedural, analytic, and representational practices are interwoven throughout qualitative inquiry, and researchers do well to keep this mind in formulating and assessing ethnography. At the same time, it is useful to consider fieldwork in its own rights in order to sort out the particulars of the research process.

Of course, constructionist impulses play out differently in fieldwork dealing with distinct settings, bound to specific disciplines, and located within particular national traditions (see, e.g., Barth, Gingrich, Parkin, & Silverman, 2005). But constructionist sensibilities, in our view, harbor impulses that transcend disciplinary boundaries. This chapter draws from an ongoing program of research on the social organization of everyday life to provide an orientation to the infusion of constructionist perspectives into fieldwork (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). The chapter is not a cross-disciplinary survey so much as a presentation of a framework of understanding or “analytics” for conducting fieldwork from a constructionist point of view.

Naturalistic and Constructionist Agendas

Naturalism is arguably the predominant orientation to ethnographic fieldwork (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). As John and Lyn Lofland (1995) put it, naturalistic stud-

ies of social settings minimize presumptions about the empirical world while striving for close, searching descriptions of everyday life. The naturalistic goal in ethnography is to understand social reality on its own terms, “as it really is,” to describe what comes naturally, so to speak. It seeks rich descriptions of people and interaction as these exist and unfold in their native habitats. Eschewing representational concerns beyond matters of veridical accuracy, this approach to ethnographic description becomes a matter of documenting and communicating true-to-life depictions of social worlds—the more thickly described the better (Geertz, 1973).

Naturalistic ethnography is replete with prescriptions and injunctions for capturing social reality on its home turf and in its own terms. One of the earliest and most impassioned pleas came from Robert Park, a founder of the “Chicago School” of field research. Reacting to what he called “armchair sociology,” Park insisted that social researchers immerse themselves in the “real world” (Bulmer, 1984). Park encouraged researchers to get close to the sources of their data. Insisting that his students get “their hands dirty in real research,” Park steered them toward firsthand observation of city streets, dance halls, hotels, and other natural areas of the city rather than the library or official statistics. He implored his students to find data in the real-life settings that captured their interest: “Go get the seat of your pants dirty in real research” (McKinney, 1966, p. 71). This admonition to get involved with the people and communities under study permeates the ethnographic perspective to this day (see Bulmer, 1984; Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995; Gubrium & Holstein, 1997).

Whereas naturalistic ethnography aims to delve deeply into social worlds, constructionist impulses promote a different perspective. One way of describing the difference is in terms of what we call *what* and *how* questions. Whereas the naturalistic impulse in fieldwork is typically to ask “*What* is going on?” with and within social reality, constructionist sensibilities provoke questions about *how* social realities are produced, assembled,

and maintained. Rather than trying to get inside social reality, the constructionist impulse is to step back from that reality and describe *how* it is socially brought into being. Although still deeply interested in *what* is going on, constructionist sensibilities also raise questions about the processes through which social realities are constructed and sustained. The analytic focus is not so much on the dynamics within social realities as it is on the construction of social realities in the first place.

A constructionist agenda spurs ethnographers to look at and listen to the activities through which everyday actors produce the orderly, recognizable, meaningful features of their social worlds. This is an explicitly *action* orientation, focusing intently on interaction and discourse as productive of social reality (see, e.g., [Edwards & Potter, 1992](#)). Whereas the naturalistic fieldworker attends to what his or her informants say about their lives and worlds in order to understand what things mean to them (the informants), constructionist sensibilities focus the researcher on aspects of social life that reveal how social reality and an attendant social order are formulated and organized through talk and interaction. At the heart of constructionist inquiry is an abiding concern for the ordinary, everyday procedures that society's members use to make their experiences sensible, understandable, accountable, and orderly.

If many constructionists retain an appreciation of naturalists' desire to describe "what's going on," they combine such interest with decided emphasis on how these *whats* are sustained as realities of everyday life. Instead of treating social facts or social worlds either as objective parameters or as subjective perceptions, constructionist ethnographers approach them as achievements in their own right. Both inner lives and social worlds are epiphenomenal to the constructive practices of everyday life ([Holstein & Gubrium, 2003b](#)). Constructionist researchers are interested in the practical activities in which persons are continually engaged, moment by moment, to construct,

manage, and sustain the sense that their social worlds exist as factual and objectively "out there," apart from their own actions.

Given their concern with reality-constituting practices, constructionists tend to focus on the communicative processes of everyday life. Moving beyond naturalistic description of the more or less stable experiential contours of everyday life, constructionist ethnographers examine how these contours are assembled through everyday talk and interaction ([Heritage, 1984](#)). The commonplace phenomena that interest the traditional ethnographer remain important—indeed, vital—but take a temporary back seat to the interactional processes through which those phenomena are assembled and sustained. This requires ethnographic field methods and an analytic orientation that center on constructive actions more than on objects, on reality-constituting practices more than on the realities themselves.

Talk and interaction are the everyday engines driving reality construction. All forms of discourse fuel the process, including discourses that coalesce into regimes and regimes of knowledge and understanding (see [L. Miller, Chapter 13](#), this volume). Because constructionists are deeply concerned with what is done with language to construct field realities, they not only watch but also especially *listen* in order to discern how the realities are produced and sustained. Taking reality as an interactional project ([Mehan & Wood, 1975](#)), constructionist ethnography becomes the study of what people "do with words." This requires interactionally and communicatively reflexive fieldwork (see [Gubrium, 1988](#); [Mehan, 1979](#); [Miller, 1994, 1997b](#); [Spencer, 1994b](#)).

A Constructionist Analytics for Ethnography

The leading question of a constructionist analytics is, How are the realities of everyday life and their related social worlds constructed and sustained? Closely related are the questions, Constructed from what? and

Constructed under what circumstances? Clearly, answers to these questions implicate naturalistic concerns. In formulating a constructionist analytics, we have come to refer to the inclusive bailiwick of the *whats* and *hows* of social reality as *interpretive practice* (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, 2000; Holstein, 1993; Holstein & Gubrium, 1994, 2000b). Both *what* and *how* concerns may be accommodated by formulating constructionist ethnography's empirical research horizons in terms of the procedures, resources, and conditions through which reality is apprehended, understood, organized, and conveyed. If a focus on interpretive practice is constructionist in its empirical bearings, the grounds for this focus are empirically substantive. It is our view that the constructive *hows* of communicative practice must take account of experientially real social objects lest the social conditions that bear on constructive activity be shortchanged in our understanding of the organization of everyday life.

A constructionist analytics of interpretive practice provides a way of addressing reality-constituting processes without blindly reifying, nor needlessly ignoring, the contexts, conditions, and resources of the construction process. Centered on communicative action *in context*, it is an analytic framework eminently suited to understanding the practice of everyday life. If the social construction process is artful, as Harold Garfinkel (1967) put it, the analytics also harkens back to Karl Marx's (1956) view that participants actively construct their worlds but that they do not do so completely on their own terms. Put differently, a constructionist analytics recognizes that reality-constituting "language games" (Wittgenstein, 1958) are frequently institutionalized, which sets the practical conditions for talk and interaction. The experientially real is simultaneously and reflexively constitutive of, and constituted through, ongoing social relations. Constructionist ethnographers gaze both at and beyond immediate discursive activity to examine the ways in which broader—if still socially

constructed—circumstances, conditions, and interpretive resources mediate the reality-construction process.

In this regard, a constructionist analytics incorporates three enduring sociological preoccupations. One is interactional and concrete: an abiding interest in everyday *discursive practice*. A second is more experientially distant or transcendent: *discourse-in-practice*. The third concern is for the conditions and circumstances of interpretation that both reflexively shape and are shaped by discursive practice and discourse-in-practice. The following sections discuss how the three concerns bear on key objects of constructionist inquiry in the context of ethnographic fieldwork.

Discursive Practice

Although Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (1966) is often cited as the foundational inspiration for constructionist inquiry, Alfred Schutz not only provided the impetus for Berger and Luckmann's contribution but also set methodological benchmarks for constructionist fieldwork. Schutz (1962, 1964, 1967, 1970) drew on Edmund Husserl's (1928/1970) phenomenological philosophy to develop an approach to empirical inquiry that centers on the ways that members of society orient to and relate to each other in their social worlds. Stressing the constitutive or reflexively constructive nature of consciousness and social interaction, Schutz (1964) argues that the social sciences should focus on the ways that the lifeworld—that is, the lived world that every person takes for granted—is produced and experienced. To view this world as under construction requires that we temporarily set aside the experiential assumptions of the "natural attitude" (Schutz, 1970), that is, the everyday cognitive stance that views the world and its objects as principally "out there" or "in here," separate and distinct from acts of perception or interpretation. In the natural attitude, the constitutive role of

language is overlooked as we assume that the life world exists independent of members' presence and activity.

Schutz argues that we need to escape the natural attitude in order to effectively view and describe empirical reality. To do so, we need to "bracket" the life world. By this, he means that the researcher temporarily sets aside a taken-for-granted orientation to the objective world. The goal is to become "agnostic" regarding the reality of the social world in order to focus on how that world is constituted as real. Bracketing allows constructionist researchers to see, hear, and analyze the processes by which social reality becomes real for its participants. This is a methodological move. The question of the ultimate reality of social forms, which is ontological, is not at issue. The constructionist researcher thus temporarily suspends judgment about the nature and essence of things being studied and focuses instead on the ways in which members of the life world constitute recognizable social structures. This opens to view the commonsense knowledge, everyday reasoning, and discursive practices that members use to construct and objectify social reality. Similarly, bracketing provides the first step for constructionist ethnographers in orienting to the lifeworld and its social forms.

Ethnomethodology shares Schutz's orientation to the lifeworld but is exclusively concerned with the everyday *hows* of real-time talk and social interaction. As Douglas Maynard and Steven Clayman (1991) explain, ethnomethodology addresses the problem of order in everyday life by combining a "phenomenological sensibility" with a paramount concern for constitutive social practice. Garfinkel's (1967) pioneering ethnomethodological studies posited a model of social order built on the contingent, embodied, ongoing interpretive work of ordinary members of society. Society's members, he argued, possessed the practical linguistic and interactional skills through which the observable, accountable, and orderly features of everyday reality were mean-

ingfully produced. As John Heritage (1984) puts it, social order from an ethnomethodological point of view is virtually "talked into being." Many constructionist ethnographers borrow from this, explicitly or implicitly bringing ethnomethodological sensibilities to bear on constructionist projects (see Gubrium, 1988; Gubrium & Holstein, 2000; Holstein & Gubrium, 2005; McHugh, 1968; Mehan, 1979; Miller, 1994, 1997b; Moerman, 1974, 1988; Pollner, 1987; Spencer, 1994b; Sudnow, 1972; Turner, 1974).

More than other constructionist approaches, ethnomethodologically informed studies have paid close attention to the fine details of talk and interaction (see, e.g., Drew, Raymond, & Weinberg, 2006). How this attention is focused, however, varies across different ethnomethodological modalities. Ethnographically oriented studies emphasize the situated content of talk as constitutive of local meaning (e.g., Wieder, 1988). Other ethnomethodologically oriented studies emphasize the conversational machinery of everyday interaction (see Heritage, 1984; Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974). Conversation analysis (CA)—which is arguably a close relative, if not an essential component, of ethnomethodology (see Atkinson, 1988; Lynch & Bogen, 1994)—attempts to describe and explicate the socially constructive and collaborative practices within sequences of talk that speakers use and rely upon when they engage in social interaction. Both the production of conduct and its interpretation are viewed as accountable products of conversation's turn-taking apparatus. Through this machinery, members accomplish the intelligibility of their social worlds.

Regardless of emphasis or specific method, these perspectives place discursive practice at the forefront of empirical inquiry. The constructionist ethnographer thus finds him- or herself squarely within the domain of everyday interaction, dealing with the discursive procedures of reality construction. Communication *in situ* is scruti-

nized for the ways it works to produce, manage, and secure locally recognizable social structures. Rather than concentrating on everyday conduct *in* the world, this ethnographer examines the practices of what Melvin Pollner (1987) calls “worlding,” the linguistic actions that constitute the social world and its forms.

This is a theoretically minimalist approach in that, as a consequence of bracketing, there is no a priori social order available to theorize. There are no preexisting social forms in view to link analytically or to correlate. Propositions and hypotheses concerning the relationship between social structures, specified as variables, cannot be formulated because they have been set aside in order to make their discursive practices visible. Indeed, such propositions and hypotheses *must not* be formulated because they would compromise bracketing and analytic indifference. On this front, the constructionist ethnographer’s theoretical concerns are typically limited to members’ own indigenous theorizing and the ways in which they apply their theoretical skills to the business of making sense of everyday life. The ethnographer’s aim is to document how members themselves *use* theory in everyday talk and interaction to construct their everyday realities.

Discourse-in-Practice

Studying *how* reality is constructed inevitably leads us to questions regarding the discursive resources, or the *whats*, from which social realities are produced. Michel Foucault’s historical studies of systems of discourse suggest one method for discerning the interpretive options that are available for reality construction at any particular time or place. Broad configurations of meaningful action—which Foucault called *discourses*—set the conditions of possibility for usage and supply ways of considering questions relating to the discursive resources with which reality is constructed. The available discourses at any particular

time and/or place set the *conditions of possibility* (Foucault, 1977) for how lives and worlds are constructed. The constructionist impulse to examine the discursive possibilities of everyday life thus prevents an exclusive accent on discursive practice that might overemphasize social mechanisms and fail to distinguish distinctive social realms and their forms.

Foucault’s constructionism was assiduously attuned to distinct regimes of reality. In *Discipline and Punish* (1977), for example, he informs us that the construct of the “self” as we know it was not in common usage before the rise of panopticism. The social structure we now call the individualized self would have been literally “incredible” at a time before a discourse of individualized subjectivity had widespread currency. But today, at a time when virtually hundreds of social organizations and institutions promote discussion of the personal self, the discursive options for recognizably constructing who we are are nearly endless (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000b). Constructionist sensibilities direct the ethnographer to explore the available discursive possibilities for reality construction, not just the interactional processes of construction.

Another way of viewing constructionist impulses is in terms of what Ludwig Wittgenstein (1958) calls socially situated *language games*. Occupying an analytic space distant from Foucault’s, Wittgenstein offers an interactional way to think about the discursive resources that advance the constructionist interest in discursive possibilities. His primary concern is how to understand the meaning of words. Arguing against a correspondence theory of meaning, Wittgenstein contends that meaning is always derived from the context of a word’s use—from the practical way a word is deployed. Wittgenstein refers to different contextual configurations of usage as *language games*. These are ways of communicating that have working (if unspoken) “rules” that provide a practical sense for “what goes with what,” so

to speak. Language games are systems of usage or “forms of life” in which speakers and other participants articulate more or less recognizable linkages between words and things, drawing from well-established connections. Put differently, language games virtually constitute their own everyday realities (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000b).

Existing in a different empirical register from Foucault’s “discourses,” language games provide the basis for the interactional construction of local realities. Although Wittgenstein appears at first glance to be more in tune with ethnomethodological concerns regarding discursive practice, his notion of socially situated language games also provides analytic tools for understanding the sources and resources of discursive constructions. The argument that meaningful realities are built up within particular language games clearly resonates with Foucauldian arguments about the constructive role of discourses and discursive structures. Both perspectives suggest that discursive resources reflexively constitute the realities that words are commonsensically thought to merely describe. To engage a discourse or language game is not simply a matter of representing reality; it simultaneously constitutes that reality as it is meaningfully embedded in the discourse itself.

The procedural point that constructionists can glean from Foucault and Wittgenstein is that ethnographic attention should attend to the discursive *environments* (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001) of talk and interaction. The objective would be to describe the communicative resources (e.g., discourses, language games) available at any particular time and place. The constructionist ethnographer would therefore place discourse-in-practice squarely within the field of inquiry.

A concern for discourse-in-practice clearly complements the study of discursive practice, but it focuses more on historical, institutional, or cultural resources than on the present-time actions of social construction. At times, this focus may be somewhat distant

from face-to-face interaction. Still, if the aim is more abstract, it remains theoretically minimalist. An analytics of discourse-in-practice does not—indeed, should not—seek to formulate causal or determinate relations between discourses and/or language games and local processes of reality construction. It does not strive for a priori definitions of social structure, nor to theorize social structure’s associations or effects. Instead, the goal is to describe how systems of discourse mediate the social construction process, providing the practical, substantive groundings of everyday life.

Conditions of Construction

A focus on discourse-in-practice draws the conditions of social construction explicitly into ethnographic purview. It raises questions about the material, social, and cultural limits of discursive practice. The conditions of interpretation—some clearly visible and others somewhat nebulous in practice—are already “there” in the sense that people take them more or less for granted. These conditions and circumstances provide working groundings, borders, themes, and materials for constructing realities. Reality construction always takes place somewhere, under some conditions. Their discernible presence prompts questions such as why discursive practice moves in particular directions and what the consequences might be for the lives of those under consideration.

This impulse turns us to the varied working “contexts” that shape reality construction. Although the social construction process may be discursively artful and agentic, it is also subject to both local and more distal influences. It is always substantively mediated by the interpretive resources and circumstances at hand. As Emile Durkheim (1961) might have put it, everyday interpretation is inevitably conditioned by practical exigencies, relying on existing cultural categories or “collective representations” that are diversely articulated with the particulars of social construction.

Local culture, organizational settings, and institutional structures all mediate talk and interaction. They shape the ways individuals understand and represent local realities. They should not be viewed as prescriptions, rules, or norms for the social construction processes but rather seen as offering more or less regularized, localized ways of assigning meaning and responding to things. They provide discernible frames of interpretation and standards of accountability to which members orient as they engage in constructive activities. The ordinary, situated particulars of everyday interaction—local aspects of discursive environments—are constantly taken into account and used to construct meaningful objects of experience (see Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, 2000, 2001; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000b).

This is a constructionist's way of orienting to discursive process as more or less institutionalized, a process that is shaped by its location in relation to shared concerns (see Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Social life is replete with what Everett Hughes (1942/1984) referred to as "going concerns." For him, going concerns could be as expansive as bureaucracies or as limited as families, as insular and insidious as terrorist cells or as loosely organized and innocuous as toddlers' play groups. Hughes was always careful not to reify the patterns of interaction that constitute institutions. Such patterns were established through concerted activity and were subject to variable contingencies. For Hughes, going concerns were always emergent, continually in process.

On this front, constructionist sensibilities situate the social construction process within the context of local culture, organizational structure, going concerns, and any number of other socially organized circumstances. Accordingly, the constructionist ethnographer balances interactional with institutional or contextual analysis. Critical questions emerge: What are the cultural codes and resources available for constituting local realities? How are they locally applied? What regulates the use of particular

accounts and vocabularies of motive? These and similar questions direct ethnographic inquiry to the meaningful conditions of everyday life, conditions that influence reality construction. They direct attention to ongoing talk and interaction as it unfolds in distinct circumstances, giving as much attention to circumstances as it does to discursive practice in its own right.

An orientation to socially *situated* reality construction takes us into complex territory. As Foucault notes, discourse is not owned by anyone in particular, nor is it centered in formal authority. The same might be said of language games. Rather, power/knowledge and influence are brought to bear through socially conditioned discursive practice. Discourse works locally and contingently. Discourses are not fixed templates to be automatically employed. The categories of available discourses are articulated in practice, using available interpretive resources, fueling the work of reality construction.

Reorienting to the Field

Ethnography's naturalistic data-gathering practices and analytic conventions require retooling to accommodate constructionist impulses. Naturalistic ethnography typically draws on indigenous materials collected through observation and interviewing. Its aim, most generally, is to collect data that aid in the description, reconstruction, and/or explanation of subjects' social worlds or worldviews from the subjects' perspectives. In this approach, indigenous talk and other forms of discourse—language use in general—are viewed as *resources* that researchers themselves draw on, a means through which indigenous actors convey information that researchers seek to summarize, systematize, and generalize. Bringing constructionist sensibilities to bear on ethnography transforms the appreciation of language use. It is reconceptualized as a form of social action through which social worlds and regularities are constructed. As

such, it becomes the research *topic* in its own right, not merely a means for formulating information *about* a topic. Although this topic–resource distinction has been central to ethnomethodological inquiry from the beginning (see Cicourel, 1964; Garfinkel, 1967; Zimmerman & Pollner, 1970), it is equally pertinent to the constructionist project as well.

Following from the analytics previously presented, constructionist ethnography takes situated language use as its field of inquiry, paying close, detailed attention to linguistic activity *in situ*. Whereas naturalistic ethnography moves relatively quickly from the words of research subjects to researchers' formulations and summaries, constructionist impulses lead the ethnographer to examine practices, structures, and circumstances of language use, asking, most generally, what people are doing with their talk or discourse. The aim is to describe and analyze talk and discourse in terms of their constructive contributions instead of treating them as mere conveyances of what is going on.

Orienting to Discursive Practice

The constructionist impulse directs ethnographic interest toward the *production* of social forms and structure. For example, a naturalistic ethnographer might approach a social setting and begin to consider the various ways that standard analytic constructs or variables might relate to one another within the setting. The researcher might scrutinize a setting for ways in which members' gender relates to differential outcomes in (or beyond) that setting. Such was the case in a series of studies of the effects of candidate patients' gender on involuntary commitment decisions (see Holstein, 1987). These research reports produced equivocal results, and even Carol Warren's (1982) richly descriptive naturalistic ethnography of a mental health court was inconclusive about the relationship between candidate patients' gender and the likelihood of their commitment. Although they vary in their approach

and focus, these studies held in common the naturalistic assumption that gender was a fixed characteristic (variable) of candidate patients, one that might influence courtroom outcomes.

Bringing constructionist sensibilities to this line of inquiry, however, orients us to a different field of action. Instead of asking, How does gender affect commitment hearing outcomes? a constructionist impulse raises this question: How is gender (talk) *used* to affect hearing outcomes? This question leads us directly to discursive practice and the reality-structuring work accomplished by courtroom talk. Rather than treating gender as a fixed element of the scene, a constructionist project would attend to the situated construction of gender and its effects.

This was the orientation to talk and interaction of James Holstein's (1987, 1993) ethnography of involuntary commitment proceedings. The study showed that courtroom participants typically argued cases in terms of the "tenability" of the proposed fit between mentally ill candidate patients and community living situations putatively available to them (Holstein, 1984, 1987, 1993). Candidate patients' vulnerability and manageability were key dimensions of these arguments. A mentally ill person viewed as especially vulnerable to life's unpredictable exigencies would be a poor candidate for community release and thus would likely be committed. Conversely, a candidate patient who was viewed as easily manageable in a community setting was more likely to be released. In the course of such commitment arguments, gender was frequently—but variably—brought to the discursive forefront.

For example, Kathleen Wells, a 32-year-old white female, became a candidate for commitment when she was found living in a large cardboard box beneath a railroad overpass. At her hearing, the viability of this shelter was the focus of concern. In presenting arguments for commitment, the district attorney referred to the deficiencies of this

dwelling and then used the candidate patient's gender as a lens for viewing this arrangement as especially untenable:

Now I know Miss Wells claims that this [the cardboard box] is as good as the subsidized public housing programs the DSS [Department of Social Services] has suggested she look into, but we have to consider more than its construction aspects. . . . You can't allow a woman to be exposed to all the other things that go on out there under the [railroad] tracks. Many of those men have lived like that for years, but we're talking about a woman here. A sick and confused woman who doesn't realize the trouble she's asking for. She simply cannot live like that. That's no place for a woman, especially after dark. . . . She's not taking it [being a woman in the midst of men] into account. She doesn't realize how dangerous it is for her. It's up to the court to protect her. (Holstein, 1987, pp. 146–147)

In analyzing this case, Holstein (1987, p. 147) noted that the district attorney implied that the proposed living arrangement might have been tolerable, if not entirely acceptable, for men, but it was unequivocally unacceptable *for a woman*. The tenability of the living circumstance depended on the version of the candidate patient's gender that was rhetorically summoned on this occasion. Not only was gender situationally invoked as an important concern, but its meaning was also circumstantially crafted as an interpretive framework for understanding the situation at hand. Gender and its meaning were *made* relevant as they were locally constructed. The use of "gender talk" was thus a key rhetorical action leading to a decision to commit.

To illustrate that gender talk is highly circumstantial and artful, Holstein juxtaposed a similar commitment hearing. In the second instance, Sharlene Fox, a 27-year-old African American female, was released into the care of her mother and aunt instead of being involuntarily committed. The judge in the case offered the following explanation:

I'm releasing this woman if she'll go and stay with her family, her mother and her aunt. They'll take her in . . . and give her a good place to stay. [To Ms. Fox: But you gotta do what they say or you'll be right back in here.] Her mother should be able to deal with her this time. Her [Sharlene's] husband's not around [he had been portrayed as an irresponsible troublemaker] and she should be able to take care of her daughter all right Her symptoms seem to be under control and I think that between the two of them they can manage her. It's not like she's some 200 pound guy who they'd have to put in a straight jacket if he got off his medication. . . . We're talking about a woman here who isn't going to be able to cause much trouble. (Holstein, 1987, p. 147)

In this case, the analysis (p. 147) focused on how gender was invoked as a component of Ms. Fox's manageability. The judge explicitly contrasted how a woman, as opposed to a man, could be appropriately housed in the available circumstances. Gender was used to portray the candidate patient as easily managed and her living arrangements as tenable, under the circumstances. The larger point to be gleaned is that it was discursive *work* that produced a "gender effect," and this effect is visible only by paying close attention to reality-constituting practices.

A wide variety of ethnographic studies evince this constructionist appreciation for discursive practice. Hugh Mehan's (1979) "constitutive ethnography" of schools and classrooms examines the social structuring activities that assembled everyday realities in educational settings. Grounded in ethnomethodological and CA traditions, *Learning Lessons* (Mehan, 1979) pays extremely close attention to the details of talk-in-school-interactions. Also displaying ethnomethodological sensibilities, David Buckholdt and Jaber Gubrium's (1979) *Caretakers* ethnographically examined the discursive construction of emotional disturbance and its treatment. Paralleling Mehan in their orientation to discursive practice, Buckholdt and Gubrium, however, are less concerned with

the sequential conversational construction of local realities as they are with narrative accounting practices. Holstein's ethnography of involuntary commitment proceedings (1993) falls somewhere in the middle, looking at both sequential and narrative production. Nonetheless, all of these ethnographies share an explicit focus on how talk is used to produce the local realities of concern. They represent only the tip of the iceberg of constructionist ethnographies. Studies of "client work" (Spencer, 1994a) and "person production" (Holstein, 1992) illustrate how individuals are differentially constructed as social objects, either institutionally or otherwise. Constructionist ethnography also has examined the discursive practices through which a wide variety of social forms are constructed, including family (Gubrium, 1992; Gubrium & Holstein, 1990), the life course (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000a), homelessness (Marvasti, 2003), and insanity and addiction (Weinberg, 2005).

Orienting to Discourse-in-Practice

If studies of discursive practice tend to emphasize talk and interaction or other forms of discursive exchange, ethnographies of discourse-in-practice use historical, cultural, or textual material and field observations to document the production of systems of discourse. Foucault's groundbreaking work is illustrative. Foucault provides compelling historical examinations of the emergence of regimes of power/knowledge through which reality is produced and apprehended. He describes discourses that constitute social forms as widely varied as the self (1977, 1988), medicine and the clinic (1975), sexuality (1978), and madness, insanity, and psychiatry (1965). Traces of Foucault's approach and procedures can be found in more contemporary ethnographic applications (see Kendall & Wickham, 1999)

If not expressly Foucauldian, other contemporary examinations of discourse-in-practice have ethnographic components that focus on social problems. These include

studies of the emergence of discourses of social problems (Holstein & Miller, 1993, 2003a; Spector & Kitsuse, 1977), homelessness (Spencer, 1996), hate crime (Jenness & Broad, 1997; Jenness & Grattet, 2004), rape (Martin, 2005), fatness and thinness (Sobal & Maurer, 1999), domestic violence (Berns, 2004), and marital equality and inequality (Harris, 2006), among many others. Many of these and similar studies are descriptions of social movements, involving significant ethnographic examinations of the dynamics of organizational action, as well as resource and media mobilization, and inter- and intragroup contentiousness (see Benford & Hunt, 2003), all of which deal with discourses of various kinds.

Working in a related vein, Gale Miller (1997a) has conducted an exemplary "ethnography of institutional discourse" (1994, p. 280) that documents the emergence and use of discursive resources in organizing the therapeutic work of a therapy agency. Miller's study is especially instructive because it is an ethnography of the discourse structures and discursive resources that characterized the same agency in two different historical periods. This 12-year study of Northland Clinic, an internationally prominent center of brief therapy, describes a marked shift in the discourse of client subjectivity that accompanied a conscious alteration of treatment philosophy. When Miller began his fieldwork, Northland employed ecosystemic brief therapy, which emphasized the social contexts of clients' lives and problems. In this therapeutic environment, clients' subjectivity was linked with the systems of social relationships that were taken to form and fuel their problems. The approach required the staff to discern and discuss the state of these systems and to intervene so as to alter their dynamics and thereby effect change. Miller notes that this approach was informed by the modern discourse of real psychological and relational problems.

Several years after Miller's fieldwork began, Northland shifted to a more postmod-

ern discourse, which articulated intervention in a solution- (as opposed to problem-) oriented, constructivist discourse. Therapists began to practice solution-focused brief therapy, which meant viewing troubles as distinctive ways of talking about everyday life. This prompted the staff to orient to the therapy process as a set of language games, consciously appropriating Wittgenstein's sense of the term. The idea was that troubles were as much constructions—ways of talking or forms of life—as they were real difficulties for the clients in question. This conception transformed clients' institutional subjectivity from that of being relatively passive agents of systems of personal troubles and negative stories to a conception of them as active problem constructors and solvers with the potential to formulate positive stories about themselves and design helpful solutions. An everyday language of solutions, not a discourse of problems, became the basis of intervention. Changes in the therapy agency clearly displayed the alternate discourses-in-practice, which, in turn, were mobilized in talk and interaction. This resulted in the construction of distinctly different "clients" and "problems" (subsequently "solutions"). Miller's (1997a) study vividly highlights the emergence and use of contrasting discursive resources, as well as the constraints that the discourses entail.

Attending to Discursive Conditions

The work of Erving Goffman provides a point of departure for attending to the circumstances that shape the construction process. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959), for example, he portrays interaction in highly active, creative, agentic terms. But he also attends to the conditions of interaction, most importantly those that bear on the construction of moral order. According to Randal Collins (1980, p. 200), Goffman stresses the "hard external constraints of society upon what individuals can afford to do and believe," but he also allows

for considerable flexibility. For Goffman, ever-changing situational demands produce interpretive variability.

Goffman's concern for the production and management of the moral order leads to his interest in the situational contours of social life: "My perspective is situational, meaning here a concern for what one individual can be alive to at a particular moment, this often involving a few other particular individuals and not necessarily restricted to the mutually monitored arena of face-to-face gatherings" (Goffman, 1974, p. 8). For Goffman (1964, p. 134), "Social situations at least in our society constitute a reality *sui generis* as he [Durkheim] used to say, and therefore need and warrant analysis in their own right, much like that accorded other basic forms of social organization." "Social situatedness" thus assumes a commanding role in Goffman's ethnography. His analytic vocabulary of situated action directs empirical attention to the contours of the "interaction order" (1983) within which people conduct their everyday lives, conveying the artfulness of reality-defining action.

Studies of the circumstances of social construction may take into consideration the working objectives motivating reality construction, the audiences who are involved with these realities, the accountability structures that operate in particular circumstances, and the interpretive resources that are locally available (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997). In addition, Goffman would not let the constructionist ethnographer forget the physical features of a setting as they relate to talk and interaction. Some of the most important contingencies of reality construction are such material features of a social setting as bodies, rooms and doors, furniture arrangements, and lighting. Consider, for example, how Gubrium attended to the role of an ordinary physical object—a ticking clock—as it was used to represent the self in the midst of an Alzheimer's disease support group meeting (Gubrium & Holstein, 1995, pp. 709–710). During a discussion of the

burdens of home care, the wife of a dementia sufferer described the challenge of deciding whether or not to place her husband in a nursing home. Pointing to a ticking clock on a nearby shelf, she remarked, “That there clock’s me. It’ll keep ticking away until it’s time [to decide] and won’t stop for a minute, until it winds down, I guess.” Focusing on the discursive use of the clock, Gubrium shows the reader how, for the wife and others, “winding down” signifies the gradual decline of the caregiving wife. She needlessly wastes away, martyring herself for someone who has become the “mere shell” of a former self.

In the preceding analysis, the clock is a culturally recognizable symbol conscripted for self-construction. Its familiar characteristics are used metaphorically, but its concrete, physical presence is also crucial in communicating the dilemma at hand. Concrete references to the clock visibly represent a self whose incessant temporal progression into ill health might not be readily communicated on its own. The clock, according to Gubrium, is taken on board rhetorically to concretize the experience in question. A virtual cultural cliché, presumably recognizable to other competent members of society and certainly familiar to those who have participated in the Alzheimer’s disease movement (Gubrium, 1986), it becomes a device for shared understanding. It is crucial to this setting and the social construction process because it serves to *materially* mediate the transmission of cultural meaning. The material setting—the concrete physical circumstances of interaction—thus become important parameters of the ethnographic field. We see this even more prominently in Gubrium’s comparative ethnography of family therapy agencies (1992), which underscores the importance of engaging the sheer scenic presence of reality-constructing material. This study shows vividly how tissue boxes, teddy bears, waiting rooms, and clients’ chairs, among many other physical objects, are used to mediate

and convey personal meaning in the therapy environment.

Procedural Adaptations

Bringing constructionist sensibilities to ethnographic fieldwork also involves procedural adaptations to traditional field methods and analytic strategies. It does not require reinventing the wheel, but it does demand that research techniques explicitly attend to the social construction process. Naturalistic ethnography, of course, deals explicitly with interaction. In their superbly detailed guide to *Writing Ethnographic Fieldnotes*, Robert Emerson, Rachel Fretz, and Linda Shaw (1995, p. 14) urge researchers to “value close, detailed reports of interaction.” Although this suggestion is aimed primarily at a naturalistic audience, it is true even more so for the constructionist ethnographer. For the constructionist ethnographer, however, the focus is as much on the *hows* as the *whats* of everyday life.

Fieldnotes, Recordings, and Transcripts

In light of their deep concern for socially situated discourse, constructionist ethnographers collect documents of discourse and discursive environments. Data collection focuses on capturing the communicative, as well as the interactive, details of settings of interest. The constructionist ethnographer is drawn to settings as scenes in which reality-construction *work* is taking place. There has long been debate concerning the relative advantages and disadvantages of “natural” versus “contrived” or “provoked” data (e.g., observation vs. interviewing and intentionally elicited or experimentally induced conversation and actions—see Atkinson & Coffey, 2002; Becker & Geer, 1957; Lynch, 2002; Potter, 2002; Speer, 2002). Although naturally occurring talk and interaction may be widely preferred, in principle there is no reason to ex-

clude “provoked” communication—as long as analysis focuses on the discursive work being done in the talk that has been elicited in one way or another.

Beyond capturing the details of settings and their events, the constructionist ethnographer is especially concerned with recording discursive data. Most standard ethnographic data collection techniques remain useful but require modification (see Emerson et al., 1995; Jackson, 1995; Sanjek, 1990). Fieldnotes, for example, include as much indigenous discursive detail as possible. A higher degree of attention to the actual talk in interaction generally characterizes constructionist ethnography.

All fieldnotes are *inscriptions*—not literal reproductions—of field realities (Emerson et al., 1995; Geertz, 1973). They unavoidably transform witnessed events and scenes according to preconceptions, conventions, framing, and other forms of selectivity. Whereas naturalistic fieldnotes strive for rich snapshots of the field, which can be used to describe and summarize those scenes, constructionist ethnography is more concerned with what members do with words. Although selectivity is imposed in choosing what to record or inscribe, the constructionist fieldworker typically strives to capture as much *in situ* verbatim detail as possible, preserving the opportunity to later “unpack” talk-in-interaction for the constructive work entailed. Sometimes this amounts to close-to-verbatim records of key spates of talk, noted as much as possible in speakers’ own words. Sometimes constructionist projects require greater detail in terms of conversational sequencing and structure.

Audio- (or video-) tape recordings of interactions can be advantageous, as they allow for a more detailed reconstruction of what has discursively transpired. Of course, a transcribed tape recording cannot fully substitute for an actually observed interaction, especially in terms of context and scenic presence, but it does provide the opportu-

nity to repeatedly consult the data to uncover patterns that might not have been initially apparent. Candace West (1996) has argued persuasively that if ethnographers’ analyses focus on talk, there is much to be gained from the use of detailed transcriptions and/or the detailed preparation of fieldnotes that approximate verbatim records (so-called do-it-yourself transcripts; Atkinson & Drew, 1979).

Of course tape recording is often impossible in field settings, and do-it-yourself transcripts are possible only under special conditions—often highly regimented institutional circumstances such as court hearings in which turns at talk are preallocated (see Holstein, 1993, Appendix; West, 1996). Nevertheless, if one’s aim is to show precisely, in talk-in-interaction, how social order and meaning are talked into being, then less than perfect, do-it-yourself transcripts can be valuable despite their imperfections.

Consider another example from Holstein’s (1993) involuntary commitment study. One analytic point of his research report related to the collaborative production of “crazy talk” during the hearings. Holstein argued that talk that was ostensibly and commonsensically considered evidence of mental illness and interactional incompetence in the hearings was empirically the result of competent collaboration in conversational practice.

The following extract is a segment of the district attorney’s cross-examination of Henry Johnson that a judge cited in his account for hospitalizing Mr. Johnson. Among other things, the judge noted that Johnson’s testimony was “confused and jumbled.” As he put it, “He [Johnson] didn’t know what to say. He was stopping and starting, jumping from one thing to another. You can see that he can’t focus on one thing at a time” (Holstein, 1993, p. 108).

1. DA: How you been feeling lately?
2. HJ: OK
3. ((Silence))

4. HJ: I been feeling pretty good.
 5. ((Silence))
 6. DA: Uh huh
 7. ((Silence))
 8. HJ: Pretty good, ummm all right
 9. ((Silence))
 10. HJ: Got a job with (several words inaudible)
 11. ((Silence))
 12. HJ: Pays OK, not bad.
 13. ((Silence 4 seconds))
 14. HJ: My car got hit, an accident, really messed it up
 15. ((Silence))
 16. HJ: Got to get it on the street
 17. ((Silence 5 seconds))
 18. HJ: They gonna let us go to the truck out front?
 19. DA: When you're all done here they might.

In his analysis, Holstein (1993, pp. 108–110) notes that this stretch of talk is discontinuous and multifocused. It is a speech environment characterized by failed speaker transition and recurrent silence. In court, the talk was heard as Mr. Johnson's own doing, interpreted as symptomatic or probative of Johnson's interactional incompetence. But, Holstein argued, it is possible to consider this halting, disjointed movement from one line of talk to another as a *collaborative* phenomenon. If one frames discontinuous utterances as proffered solutions to the problems that witnesses confront as they attempt to produce responsive testimony in a nonresponsive environment, one can interpret Mr. Johnson's testimony in an entirely different light. The detailed transcription of the talk, including the notation and placement of silences, provides the basis for claiming that silences and topic shifts resulted from the DA's refusal to assume a turn at talk at appropriate or expected junctures or to minimally acknowledge that Mr. Johnson had satisfactorily completed an utterance in his turn at talk. Arguing that silences and topic changes often result from failures at speakership transition, Holstein was able to demonstrate empirically that the disjointed talk was explainable in CA terms,

suggesting that Mr. Johnson's "jumbled" speech resulted from his competent attempt to sustain conversation in a speech environment in which his conversational partner (the DA) was not fulfilling his turn-taking responsibilities. Such an analysis would not be possible without transcriptions written with the requisite level of detail.

West (1996) enumerates several ways in which recording and transcription of talk in field settings benefits the ethnographic enterprise. But she also notes both practical and analytic limitations. There are two crucial points that constructionists should take from West's thoughtful assessment of the utility of transcription in field research. First, it is imperative to collect data at the level of detail necessary and appropriate to the goals of analysis. Second, the researcher should be careful not to make analytic claims that cannot be supported by the level of detail available in the recorded data.

Maynard (2003) also considers the relationship between ethnography and the fine-grained, sequential analysis of talk-in-interaction that characterizes CA. He draws an important distinction between collecting data to analyze an activity (which is the aim of CA) and collecting data to describe a setting (which is major goal of naturalistic ethnography). Calling for mutual appreciation between CA and ethnography, Maynard (2003) specifies two approaches to their joint use in research projects: "mutual affinity" and "limited affinity." At the risk of oversimplifying, the former approach is likely to begin from a more naturalistic, ethnographic standpoint. The focus would be on what might be transpiring in a setting, and analysis would work toward explication of how local realities might come about, perhaps using discourse and CA techniques in the process. Working from a standpoint of limited affinity, however, the researcher would be more cautious about the unexplicated use of contextual material at the expense of shortchanging the sequentially emergent context of interaction within

which all speech acts are embedded. The tendency would be to work more closely with carefully recorded and transcribed spates of talk, mining them for the properties of social organization displayed within.

Anthropologists Michel Moerman (1988) also has proposed a more symbiotic relationship between ethnographic fieldwork and CA. In *Talking Culture*, he suggests that ethnographic studies of how people make sense of their lives should try to find out how the organization of talk influences the sensemaking process. This call has been echoed in several other proposals for more conversationally sensitive ethnographic approaches (e.g., Gubrium & Holstein, 1997; Miller, 1994, 1997b; Spencer, 1994b). Although Moerman's companion suggestion that CA be more sensitive to surrounding context has not been warmly embraced across the CA community, West (1996) argues that a number of fruitful developments in CA have stemmed from debates over Moerman's proposal.

Interviews

Interviews are a staple of ethnographic fieldwork. There are, however, important differences in how they are used and analyzed as part of a constructionist project. Harboring both *what* and *how* concerns, constructionist ethnographers engaged in interviewing need to keep in mind the distinction between collecting data in order to analyze discursive activity and collecting data to describe a setting.

Traditional approaches to interviewing tend to see the interview as a medium for the transmission of information (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Kvale, 1996; Wooffitt & Widdicombe, 2006). The informant or respondent is treated as a vessel of answers about his or her social world, and the interview is viewed as a means of extracting, in an uncontaminated fashion, that information that naturally lies within (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995). From a constructionist perspective, however, the interview should be

conceived as more active. It is the site of social interaction from which meaningful accounts of social life are assembled and conveyed. The knowledge or information produced is therefore both collaboratively produced and continually under construction (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995).

Following this perspective, ethnographic interviewing guided by constructionist impulses proceeds much like the many variants of traditional naturalistic interviewing (see Gubrium & Holstein, 2002). Although the constructionist would be more aware of the unavoidably collaborative nature of interviewing, he or she would nevertheless observe many of the conventional guidelines and strictures governing the interview process. Although the interview process itself might be indistinguishable from conventional, informal interviewing, there would be analytic justification for more active exchanges between all participants, if desired. Constructionist impulses, however, would be clearly evident in the analysis of interview data, which, as the following section shows, orients to interview data more as social action than as retrieved information.

Data Analysis

Ethnographic data analysis guided by constructionist concerns orients to the constitutive work done by interaction, discourses-in-practice, and their mediating circumstances. Several descriptions of constructionist discourse analyses are included in this *Handbook* (see L. Miller, Chapter 13; Potter & Hepburn, Chapter 14; and Nikander, Chapter 21, this volume). Other forms of analysis are more narratively oriented and more or less ethnographic (e.g., Chase, 2005; Gubrium & Holstein, in press; Riessman, 1993). CA and ethnomethodological approaches and techniques may also be informative (see Drew et al., 2006; Garfinkel, 1967; Heritage, 1984; Holstein, 1993; Maynard, 2003; Mehan, 1979; Mehan & Wood, 1975; Silverman, 2004, 2006; ten Have, 1999; West, 1996; Wieder, 1988).

Long-standing guides to data analysis have been adapted to the constructionist enterprise, including the grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In Chapter 20 of this volume, Kathy Charmaz suggests that grounded theory strategies can fruitfully be used to create and interrogate constructionist data. The familiar procedures of coding, categorization, and comparison can be applied to constructionist data when proper attention is paid to the work of constructing social forms. The distinguishing feature of a constructionist application would be the emphasis on describing reality—constructing social processes in the data.

Another feature distinguishing constructionist studies is their analytic vocabulary. Constructionist vocabulary is replete with categories of action; its terminology and idioms virtually constitute empirical horizons of discursive activity. At the risk of oversimplifying, constructionist ethnography is characterized by key analytic terms that refer to members' reality work. These terms typically take the form of gerunds—wording derived from verbs but functioning as nouns, as in “*producing* reality” or “*accomplishing* social order.” These verbs are given the form of nouns in order to name types of constructive activity. Other common features of the vocabulary include expressions of “practices,” such as in descriptive practice and narrative practice, or types of “work,” such as biographical work (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000a), identity work (Gubrium & Holstein, 2001), and social problems work (Holstein & Miller, 2003b). The unifying thread of this vocabulary is its utility in highlighting reality-constituting activity.

The analysis of ethnographic interview data nicely illustrates other differences between constructionist and naturalistic analysis. In naturalistic analyses, interview data are copiously presented as evidence of informants' experience and point of view. Their descriptions, accounts, and narratives are taken as representative of the key variables, themes, and frameworks of meaning that members of settings recognize and appreci-

ate. The analyst scours the corpus of interview data to extract generalizable observations and analyses from what informants have said, then offers exemplary interview extracts to corroborate or illustrate orienting hypotheses, themes emerging from the analysis, and generalizations about the field in question (Mehan, 1979; Zimmerman & Pollner, 1970). Data extracts tend to be used illustratively but are not *analyzed* per se.

Consider, for example, the naturalistic use of interview data in Robert Prus's and Styllianoss Irini's (1980) study of a hotel community, *Hookers, Rounders, and Desk Clerks*. One would be hard pressed to find an ethnography that contained more excerpts of informants' interview talk; a conservative estimate suggests that well over 50% of the 266 pages of core text are devoted to informants' talk. Typically, the authors describe a feature of community life, offer an extrapolated generalization, then proffer extended interview extracts in illustration, often prefaced with the following sort of explication: “The following extracts indicate both the sorts of concerns the girls have and the sorts of approaches they encounter” (p. 12). Following the extracts, the text typically moves to a new topic, with further illustration of the new topic. Interview data used in this fashion offer insights—in the “authentic” voices of the informants themselves—into what informants think is going on. There is, however, little analysis on the part of the researcher. Instead, the interview talk is left to “speak for itself.” As descriptively interesting as such a report might be in terms of what is going on from the informant's point of view, the researchers say little about *how* social worlds and meanings are created and sustained.

In contrast, constructionist sensibilities lead the analyst to look for what informants are “doing with words” in the interview. The analyst would typically present a data extract, then analyze, in considerable detail, what is going on in the extract—that is, what discursive work is being done by the spate of talk. The analysis might proceed in terms of

narrative analysis (see, e.g., Chase, 1995; Holstein & Gubrium, 1995; Marvasti, 2003), discourse analysis (e.g., Wooffitt & Widdicombe, 2006), ethnomethodology (e.g., Baker, 2002), or CA (e.g., Maynard, Houtkoop-Steenstra, Schaeffer, & van der Zouwen, 2002), just to name a few possibilities. All these approaches would attempt to unpack the constitutive practices imbedded in the talk. The interview data would *not* be left to speak for themselves.

For example, in his interview study of nursing home narratives, *Speaking of Life* (1993), Gubrium uses nursing home residents' own words and voices to convey aspects of life in the nursing home. But the study's constructionist impulses yield an analytic vocabulary of "biographical work," "horizons of meaning," and "narrative linkage" that help the analyst (and reader) understand *how* residents produce and structure the meaning of life and death, aging, health, illness, family, God, and the past, present, and future. The study focuses on how, in "speaking of life," nursing home residents construct the lives in question. The study is as much about *how* life is spoken as it is about what is said. We find similar analytic developments in many other constructionist interview studies. For example, we can see the social construction of various social forms in studies of the production of homelessness (Marvasti, 2003), equality and inequality (Harris, 2006), sexual identity (Chase, 2001), and divorce (Hopper, 2001), just to mention a very few constructionist interview studies.

Analytic Bracketing

As is evident in the preceding sections, discursive practice, discourse-in-practice, and discursive conditions are intimately intertwined and mutually constitutive. Dealing with the interplay poses procedural challenges. Constructionists need a way to consider discursive practice without depicting it as unconditionally artful and unconstrained by resources and circumstances, but with-

out, in turn, letting practice be overwhelmed by the resources and circumstances in which it is embedded. At the same time, they need to highlight the resources available to discursive practice without simply casting discourses as mere artifacts of situated interaction. And there is the need to consider conditions of interpretation without reifying discursive context in order to document the constructed grounds of everyday life.

Phenomenological bracketing can open the construction process to view, but it does little to help us take account of the prevailing discourses and conditions of social life. As a stride in this direction, we suggest an analytic practice located at the crossroads of social interaction, discursive environments, local culture, and material circumstance. This practice might purposefully "misread" strictures from naturalistic, Foucauldian, and ethnomethodological traditions, coopting useful insights in order to appreciate the possible complementarity of different analytic idioms. It centers on the interplay, not the synthesis, of situated discursive practice, discourse-in-practice, and discursive conditions.

To achieve analytic footing for viewing both the *hows* and *whats* of interpretive practice, we refer to a procedural imperative we have called *analytic bracketing* (Gubrium & Holstein, 1997, 2000; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000b, 2003a, 2005). Analytic bracketing is similar in some respects to the a priori bracketing employed in phenomenology and ethnomethodology. It differs in that it employs an alternating or oscillating indifference to the realities of everyday life, allowing the analyst to momentarily focus on the *hows* and *whats* of the construction process.

This is a methodological move, not an ontological one. The more phenomenological or ethnomethodological versions of bracketing begin analysis by setting aside all assumptions about forms of social organization and structure in order to view the everyday practices by which subjects, objects, and events come to have an accountable sense of being observable, rational, and

orderly. The analytic project advances from there, documenting how discursive practices constitute the realities in question. The aim is to make visible how language is used to construct the objects it is otherwise viewed as principally describing.

Analytic bracketing operates somewhat differently. It is applied throughout analysis, not just at the start. As analysis proceeds, the investigator intermittently orients to everyday realities as both the *products* of members' reality-constructing procedures and as *resources* from which realities are constituted. At one stage, the research may be indifferent to the structures, conditions, and available discourses of everyday life in order to document their production through discursive practice. In the next analytic move, the analyst brackets discursive practice in order to assess the local availability, distribution, and/or regulation of resources and conditions of reality construction. This leads to alternating considerations of locally fine-grained discursive practices at one juncture, of discourse-in-practice at another, and of the conditions of construction at still other points in the analysis. The objective is to move back and forth between discursive practice, discourse-in-practice, and discursive conditions, documenting each in turn and making informative references to the others in the process.

The emphasis on the interplay between the *hows* and *whats* of the construction process is paramount in analytic bracketing. The technique carefully avoids analytically emphasizing discursive practice, discourse-in-practice, or discursive conditions at the expense of the others. The aim is to document the interchange between the interactional, discursive artfulness entailed in assembling everyday reality, on one hand, and the cultural, institutional, and contextual circumstances, resources, and discourses that mediate discursive practice on the other. Because these are viewed as mutually constitutive, one cannot argue that analysis should necessarily begin or end with any particular aspect. Wherever one chooses to focus, nei-

ther the cultural, institutional, or material foundations of discourse nor the constructive dynamics of interaction predetermines the other. If we set aside the need to formally resolve the question of which comes first or last or has priority, we can designate a reasonable starting point from which to begin and proceed from there, so long as we keep firmly in mind that the interplay requires that we move back and forth analytically. Of course, researchers of different stripe may be inclined to start at different places and that, no doubt, will shape how analysis proceeds.

The back-and-forth movement of analytic bracketing is far from arbitrary; it is keyed to emergent analytic needs. As the researcher documents constructive activities, questions regarding what is being constructed, what resources are used, and what conditions shape the process provoke a shift in analytic stance—a change in analytic brackets that is necessary to address such questions. Subsequently, the analyst's attention to the *whats* under consideration will, in turn, prompt the researcher to ask *how* these features of lived experience came to be regarded as real, inducing yet another shift in brackets.

It is unlikely, if not improbable, that any single study will become a full-scale exercise in analytic bracketing. Social scientists tend to work in units corresponding to book chapters or journal articles. As a practical matter, most constructionist ethnographies will be presented incrementally, focusing on one component of the social construction process, then taking up another aspect at a later time. There are occasions, however, on which the various aspects of the construction process may be alternatively bracketed and described within the same report. This was the case when Gubrium undertook an ethnographic study of the Alzheimer's disease experience in the 1980s (Gubrium, 1986). In this study, Gubrium alternately focused on *what* people knew Alzheimer's disease to be and *how* it was descriptively constituted. The study maintained several analytic focal points. One part of the study bracketed

the organic components of the condition in order to look at how the discourse of “the disease” was publicly formulated and took currency. This part of the analysis drew mostly on documents and public statements—publicity directed at constituting Alzheimer’s disease as a new sort of disease entity.

A second aspect of the study focused on the “public culture” of Alzheimer’s disease. This involved a series of bracketing moves that allowed the analyst to describe discourses-in-practice as resources for interpreting a newly emergent “disease.” Then, the focus would shift again as analysis turned to the ways in which the public culture was expressed and communicated through mass media and other forms of publicity.

Once again shifting brackets, the study then turned to the discursive practices by which the new experience of Alzheimer’s disease was articulated in the daily lives of persons serving as caregivers to Alzheimer’s sufferers. The focus here was on discursive practice, highlighting the ways in which participants in the growing public culture of the disease interactionally constituted it and its ill effects as a practical feature of their everyday lives. This portion of the study examined the way a new discourse literally was put into experiential practice in face-to-face interaction. Of course, the description of interactional practice also led, in turn, to discussions of how local circumstances conditioned the new discourse in place.

Over the course of this study, the analytic focus shifts repeatedly from the *whats* to the *hows* of interpretive practice, from discourse-in-practice to discursive practice, to conditions of interpretation, and back again. In doing so, it becomes evident that continual analytic bracketing is required in order to gain access to—if not fully capture—the reflexive and emergent relation between social action and its varied contexts and resources.

Conclusion

Bringing constructionist impulses to ethnographic fieldwork invites assumptions, an analytic vocabulary, and procedural guidelines that differ from those of naturalistic inquiry. At the same time, it is our view, as constructionist ethnographers, that naturalistic inquiry draws attention to “realities” of the social world that must be taken into account lest social reality be conveyed as a mere swirl of communicative moves. Thus we have offered a view of constructionist impulses infused with considerable naturalistic sentiments. This demands an appreciation for the continually emergent contexts that bear on the construction of social realities. The constructionist ethnographer portrayed here is not likely to be satisfied with descriptions of local constitutive practices but also must describe how resources from beyond the interaction at hand mediate these practices.

It bears repeating that the constructionist impulse in ethnographic fieldwork does not evoke a theory of social life. Rather, it calls forth a minimalist analytics to sensitize researchers to the myriad elements of reality construction. Although this may not appeal to researchers seeking definitive descriptions of social settings or causal explanations, it does provide the basis for documenting and understanding social worlds and structures that operate in circumstances continually under construction.

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