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THEORETICAL VALIDITY AND EMPIRICAL UTILITY OF A CONSTRUCTIONIST ANALYTICS

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Wing-Chung Ho offers an extensive critique of what he calls our "radical constructionist approach to family experience," questioning the theoretical validity and empirical utility of the research program. This article responds to the charges in the broader context of the program's constructionist analytics, discussing family's experiential location, organizational embeddedness, and the importance of ethnographic sensibility. A brief extract of situated talk and interaction is presented to illustrate the discursive complexity and institutional bearings of family as a category of experience. The conclusion takes up the issue of whether the program is radical in conceptualization and empirical realization.

While now in the scientific mainstream, social constructionism remains enigmatic, if not troublesome, to some scholars and researchers. Of course, constructionism is not a singular project (see Holstein and Gubrium 2008b), which may invite the confusion or misunderstanding. Perhaps, the most common complaint appears in accusations of radical relativism—of charges that constructionism promotes a sense that "anything goes" when it comes to the meaningful formulation of experience, that social reality is "just" a social construction (see, for example, Best 2000).

Wing-Chung Ho (2012) joins the critics, offering an extensive commentary on what he calls "radical constructionism," favoring instead theoretical choices grounded in Alfred Schutz's social phenomenology and Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodology. He takes as his exemplar of "a more sophisticated approach" the constructionist analytics we have applied to the study of family (see, for example, Gubrium and Holstein 1990 and Holstein and Gubrium 1995).[1] The gist of Ho's critique is that our research program is a form of postmodernism or radical constructionism, which insists that "social reality is constituted more by the actor's usage of discourse than shaped by the social structure which is said to be fixed and static" (Ho 2012:322).[2] In effect, he argues that the program lacks substance. It is an old critique harkening back to the well-worn structure versus agency problem.

Much of Ho's description of what we have published is on target. He writes (Ho 2012:326), for example, that we hold that "the meaning of family is not something fixed once and for all; and the family experience is derived from discourse and its

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relation to the conditions of everyday life (Gubrium and Holstein 1990)." He notes (Ho 2012:326) that we suggest that "the essence of family is found in the way family is *used*, not in conventional or idealized social forms. Moreover, discursive practice becomes the vehicle which mediates the construction of family meaning and domestic reality" (Holstein and Gubrium 1999:7). Perhaps, he overstates our motivations (Ho 2012:325–326): "Holstein and Gubrium (1994:265) set out to strip the traces of modernist sociology which sustains 'the' family as an abstract, idealized social form."

Ho's reservations about our brand of constructionism derive from two sources. First, he decries what he claims is our insistence on the "primordial" status of discursive practice vis-à-vis social structure, background expectancies, habitus, or other allegedly nondiscursive factors that influence the organization of social forms. Second, he discounts the validity of our approach because we have not been sufficiently faithful to two sources of inspiration: Alfred Schutz and Harold Garfinkel. Vehemently, Ho argues (p. 323) that our model of the social construction process—and by implication, our empirical methods—are "theoretically problematic and only of limited empirical utility." "In short," he later repeats, "the radical constructionism put forth by Gubrium and Holstein has failed to offer a model with high theoretical validity and empirical utility . . ." (p. 335)—hefty charges that require solid answers.

This article responds to Ho's assessment by reiterating the program's dimensions and scope, which extend beyond family to any and all social forms, something which Ho acknowledges but marginalizes (see, for example, Gubrium and Buckholdt 1982; Holstein and Gubrium 2000a). At the heart of the program—and apparently our disagreement with Ho—is the notion that the social construction process involves discursive activity as well as interpretive resources, circumstances, and conditions, and that neither warrants analytic primacy. Pursuing this theme, we address both the theoretical and empirical aspects of Ho's critique. Because we see these as interrelated, it is ultimately impossible to discuss them separately. But for purposes of presenting a cogent response, we will proceed by addressing the theoretical validity charge first and then turn to the charge about the limited empirical utility of the program.

THEORETICAL VALIDITY

The conceptual groundings of the social construction process have been hotly debated for over a half century. Ho taps into these debates offering a view that is considerably at odds with our sense of the process.

The Primacy of Discursive Practice

Part of Ho's charge of theoretical invalidity is his claim (p. 331) that "Gubrium and Holstein need to make explicit their theoretical position on whether they consider discursive practice or the local aspects of discursive environments as more primordial in constituting reality. Gubrium and Holstein would definitely opt for the discursive." We find this puzzling in light of the way we have consistently articulated our position on the issue, one made clear in the many family-related as well as nonfamily-specific sources

Ho cites (and often fairly summarizes).[3] Rather than dissecting and refuting Ho's claim, we opt for simply pointing out pertinent aspects of our program.

Many constructionist controversies have centered on the relative primacy of communicative versus contextual factors in the social construction process (see Holstein and Miller 1993, 2003; Holstein and Gubrium 2008b). In our view, such arguments presume a false dichotomy between discursive activity and the circumstances involved in the construction process. Ho explicitly draws this distinction. He argues that the "prepredicative structure of the lifeworld, the pre-constituted stock of knowledge"—concepts borrowed from Schutz—are primordial factors of the construction of meaningful experience. (However, it is not clear throughout his commentary whether he takes this to be conventional social structure or prepredicative structure, implicating his understanding of phenomenology.) By primordial, we take Ho to mean primary or fundamental, although the term also connotes the source or point of origin.

We have argued for years that reality construction is centered in the real-time, practical work of everyday life, implicating *both* constructive activity and the resources and conditions of construction. (See, for example, Gubrium and Holstein 1997:114–22). This argument appears in almost all our publications cited in Ho's commentary.) In taking this position, we have carefully sought to avoid drawing a stark distinction between the two. Rather, we have repeatedly chosen terms such as "reflexive," "intertwined," "mutually constitutive," "dialectical," and "interplay" to describe the relationship of the two dimensions of the construction process.[4]

Reality construction, we have noted repeatedly, is a craft-like process of reflexively articulating in situ meaning with experience to give related actions their sense of substantiality. We have used the term "interpretive practice" to convey both the artfully discursive and substantive aspects of this process. Broadly, it refers to the constellation of procedures, conditions, and resources through which reality is apprehended, understood, organized, and represented in the course of everyday life (see Gubrium and Holstein 1997; Holstein 1993). Interpretive practice links the categorically artful, the concrete, and the discursive:

> People conduct their lives in diverse social circumstances, encountering reality in myriad forms. Cultural conventions and institutional settings specify possible complexes of meanings and definitions which serve as interpretive resources, promoting some interpretations, impinging upon others. While this configuration of *whats* does not determine the course of talk and interaction, it makes it understandable in its related terms. . . . [Applicable] frameworks do not strictly govern interpretations; rather, they provide participants with familiar and accountable ways of representing conditions and concerns. In effect, the potentially real is sorted for what will be taken to be the actual, using the resources at hand. Local interpersonal engagements serve as the interactional scaffolding and definitional venues for this interpretive work, both configuring the *hows* and implicating the *whats* of interpretation. . . . In everyday experience, the representational is the other side of the real. Interpretive practice gives us the *real-in-the-making*. . . . The real-in-the-making relies upon

> representational methods, what ethnomethodologists call "practical reasoning" (Garfinkel 1967). But these *hows* of reality construction are enduringly linked with *what* is under construction because interpretive practice unfolds within practical definitional circumstances. So, while interpretive practice is actively constitutive, if it were conceived exclusively in interactionally artful terms, it would seem to be out of place and time, without the interpretive building blocks that reality construction demands. (Gubrium and Holstein 1997:114–15)

The reflexivity of the artfully methodical and the substantive sides of reality construction is a key to our program. Discursive activity, on the one hand, and discursive resources and conditions, on the other, are mutually constitutive. Each inevitably involves the other. We have variously described discursive activity as employing vocabularies, schemes of interpretation, background expectations, collective representations, stocks of knowledge, local cultures, language games, institutional environments, and discourses—along with other related concepts—that have, from time to time, become working parts of our analytic vocabulary. These are all aspects of the contexts of interpretation that must be actively, situationally articulated to render experience sensible, orderly, and meaningful. Without these resources, discursive activity conveys nothing; it is empty and, as such, unrecognizable.

At the same time, interpretive conditions and resources are methodically inserted into reality construction; they do not simply assert themselves behind the backs or outside the purview of social actors. These substantive aspects of interpretation are themselves constituted by way of social interaction, built up in the practical give-and-take of everyday life. Ongoing interaction produces enduring social patterning in part because there are patterns in what is patterned and in part because patterning is informed by patterns.

Conceiving the two facets of social construction to be in opposition or competition with each other is anathema from our point of view. We use an analytic vocabulary

> that dialectically acknowledges, accommodates, and explicates both sides of the process, while remaining sensitive to the ways in which the two sides are inseparable. Moreover, given the reflexivity of constructive activity and contextual resources, it would be futile and pointless to try to establish the primacy of one over the other. (Gubrium and Holstein 1997:118)

Conceptually explicit, we have extended the phenomenological concept of bracketing to formulate a working procedure called "analytic bracketing" as a methodological guideline (see, for example, Gubrium and Holstein 1997, 2009; Holstein and Gubrium 2008a, 2011). Throughout the analytic process, the researcher alternately orients to everyday realities as both the products of members' reality-constructing activities and as realizations of interpretive resources and conditions from which realities are reflexively constituted: "At one moment, the researcher may be relatively indifferent to the interpretive contexts of everyday life in order to document their production through

discursive practice. In the next analytic move, he or she brackets discursive practice in order to assess the local availability, distribution, and/or regulation of resources for reality construction" (Holstein and Gubrium, 2011:347; also see Holstein and Gubrium 2004).

Analytic bracketing is no more specific than that; it amounts to an orienting procedure for alternately focusing on both the active and substantive sides of the construction process in order to assemble both a contextually scenic and a contextually constitutive picture of the reality under construction. The objective is to move back and forth between aspects of the process, documenting each in turn, and making informative references to the other. Either discursive machinery or available conditions, resources, and constraints become the provisional phenomenon, while interest in the other is temporarily deferred but not forgotten. The analysis of the constant interplay between aspects of the construction process mirrors the lived interplay between social interaction and its immediate surroundings, resources, and institutional contexts (see also Holstein and Gubrium 2003, 2008b; Gubrium and Holstein 2009).

This position is direct and plentiful across 25 years of publication. Early on, certainly, it was less fully developed, but its emerging presence and evolution were evident in the program from the outset even in the sources Ho cites. The book *What Is Family?* (Gubrium and Holstein 1990), for example, was a key publication in the family area. Well before we formed the idea of analytic bracketing, our concern for reflexivity was apparent.

> Family discourse, then, is both substantive and active. In terms of substance, we can think of its terminology, ideas, models, and theories as resources for both naming and making sense of interpersonal relations. . . . Family discourse is also active. Used in relation to concrete social relations, it communicates how one intends to look at, how one should understand, or what one aims to do about what is observed. . . . If discourse assigns meaning . . . life's potential meanings are limited to the discourses available. (Gubrium and Holstein 1990:15–16)

Throughout the book, discussion oscillates between the active and the substantive, alternately engaging topics such as family discourse, family usage, privileged knowledge in practice, organizational embeddedness, and local culture. At no point in our publications have we specified a primordial concern for a particular component of the construction process. We consistently write something along the following lines: "The components are viewed as mutually constitutive; each reflexively depends upon and incorporates the other. Consequently one can't argue that analysis should necessarily begin or end with any particular component" (Gubrium and Holstein 2009:29). This caveat appears in nearly every methodological text we have produced since 1997 (see, for example, Gubrium and Holstein 1997, 2000; Holstein and Gubrium 2003, 2005, 2008a, 2011). We thus find it hard to understand the basis for Ho's claim that we "definitely opt for the discursive" over the more substantive or contextual.

In his critique, Ho refers to comments on *What Is Family?* by Pierre Bourdieu (1996). Quoting Bourdieu at length, Ho reiterates his argument regarding the limits of the

discursive in slightly different terms, highlighting in support of that one of Bourdieu's signature constructs: habitus. Writing about the construction of family as a well-founded social fiction, Bourdieu (and by association, Ho) suggests that the family

> is a common principle of vision and division, a *nomos*, that we all have in our heads because it has been inculcated in us through a process of socialization performed in a world that was itself organized according to the division into families. This principle of construction is one of the constituent elements of our *habitus*, a mental structure which, having been inculcated into all brains socialized in a particular way, is both individual and collective. It is a tacit law (*nomos*) of perception and practice that is at the basis of the consensus on the sense of the social world (and of the word "family" in particular), the basis of *common sense*. (Bourdieu 1996:21; original emphases and bracket. Cited in Ho 2012)

While Ho turns to Bourdieu to underscore the claim that the prepredicative (i.e., the conventionally structural) is primordial, Bourdieu's support is not wholly compelling. By invoking the notion of habitus, Ho and Bourdieu apparently assign the primary force in the construction of family to originary mental structures. "Family," from this stance, becomes a set of laws for perception that dictate "consensus" on what, in reality, family is (Bourdieu 1996:21). Of course, the empirical world often confounds this consensus. For example, a commonly noted feature of contemporary social life (at least in the West) has been the alleged proliferation of diverse family forms (see Stacey 1990, 1992, cited in Ho 2012). With a well-developed habitus, nomos, or consensus, how is this possible? There is no specification for how, when, where, or if particular laws of perception might be invoked. In other words, there is little said about their lived application, how habitus interjects itself into lived experience in practice.[5]

While Bourdieu seems to assert the preeminence of mental structures or primordial categories, his general concern for a related reflexivity (see Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) appears to undermine Ho's unequivocal assertion of the primacy of the prepredicative. Writing about the family as a prenotion of common sense, for example, Bourdieu argues that:

> common sense and the folk categories of spontaneous sociology . . . (may) be well-founded, because they help to make things, because they help to make the reality that they describe. In the social world, words make things, because they make the consensus on the existence and the meaning of things, the common sense, the *doxa* accepted by all as self-evident. (Bourdieu 1996:21; original emphasis and brackets)

It is evident in Bourdieu's scheme of things that the discursive is important: "words make things." Indeed, Bourdieu (1996) goes on to suggest a reflexive relationship between categories and their realization that echoes our own position.

> In a kind of circle, the native category, having become a scientific category for demographers, sociologists and especially social workers who, like official

> statisticians, are invested with the capacity to work on reality, to make reality, helps to give real existence to that category. The family discourse that ethnomethodologists refer to is a powerful, performative discourse, which has the means of creating the conditions of its own verification and therefore its own reinforcement, an institutional discourse which durably institutes itself in reality.[6] (p. 25)

Ultimately, Ho's contention that the prepredicative is primordial is dubious in the context of his declared theoretical allegiances. Ho's usage throughout the commentary suggests that his position is not phenomenological but rather borders on the conventionally structural. On this front, it would appear that our ethnomethodologically informed sense of the prepredicative is more theoretically valid than Ho's. Neither Schutz nor ethnomethodologists build their ideas and work on a conventionally structural basis; rather, they set that aside in order to understand and describe how structures are assembled and sustained.

Theoretical Fealty

This brings us to the issue of theoretical fealty. Ho's view seems to be that theoretical validity requires strict allegiance to particular conceptual dogmas. His critique of our program derives from a sense that our constructionist analytics has not been faithful to Schutz and Garfinkel. Perhaps, a limited mea culpa may be in order here. Across our writings, we have expressed great appreciation for Schutz and Garfinkel, as well as many others, including but not limited to Emile Durkheim, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Michel Foucault, George Herbert Mead, Erving Goffman, Everett Hughes, C. Wright Mills, Melvin Pollner, D. Lawrence Wieder, and Dorothy Smith. As much as we borrow from them for our own use, we have been careful to avoid doctrinaire arguments or appeals to particular versions of sociological faith to bolster our perspective. Indeed, we tend to use phrases like "phenomenological background," "ethnomethodological sensibilities," and "Foucauldian inspirations" to characterize simultaneously our intellectual debts and to imply that we do not take sources of inspiration to heart wholesale. Perhaps, we have been promiscuous in our attempt to draw from perspectives as diverse as Garfinkel's and Foucault's to understand the social construction process (see Holstein and Gubrium 2000b). That is a risk we have chosen. For us, abiding adherence to a particular dogma or set of ideas has little appeal.

Ho is shortsighted on this front. He does not seem to realize that most intellectual histories develop or even change course over time, making theoretical fealty moot in the first place. Is Ho's standard of validity Garfinkel's early work, for example, or later developments of his ideas? We have also borrowed from Goffman (to be fair to Ho, he is not concerned with Goffman), but the issue of fealty might be raised there too. Is our program more inspired by the Goffman of *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) or the Goffman of *Frame Analysis* (1974)? There is a difference in substance and emphasis.

As we alluded to earlier, there is also the question of whether Ho's view of Schutz and Garfinkel is correct to begin with. We tread lightly here, because we are well aware that

any theoretical formulation is subject to interpretation, commonly producing exegetics. In our work, we have featured the everyday dimensions of the construction process, which we believe Schutz and Garfinkel also spotlight. Both are distinctly social in their views. Curiously enough, Ho argues that Schutz and Garfinkel primarily concentrate on the mentalistic, cognitive components of social construction. Oddly, too, Ho argues (p. 329) that Garfinkel was most interested in the "background expectancies of everyday life . . . which constitute the conditions under which discourse becomes understandable to actors."

Diverse readings of the classics are plentiful, and we will not quibble with Ho about what Schutz or Garfinkel really meant or intended.[7] We will point out, however, that our long-standing use of terms centered on discursive conditions and resources—local cultures, schemes of interpretation, collective representations, and the like—sound suspiciously like the concepts Ho places at the heart of Schutz' and Garfinkel's enterprises (and indicts us for slighting). At the same time, these intellectual sources probably would not have anticipated the ways in which we ourselves have built upon their ideas. Our borrowings have been selective and certainly involved modification. We have avoided claims of synthesis opting rather for a strategy of playing one conceptual source against another to gain analytic leverage on the complex process of social construction (see Gubrium and Holstein 1997; Holstein and Gubrium 2000b, for example). Theoretical fealty has never been the underlying aim of our program.

EMPIRICAL UTILITY

Ho also charges that the program is of limited empirical utility, which ostensibly refers to its value for understanding family empirically. We will respond to this charge in three ways. First is the issue of how we view family as a social form. Second, we address the matter of experiential location and the need for ethnographic sensibility. Third, we provide a brief empirical example from field material that demonstrates the utility of the approach for documenting the constructive fluidity of family as a social form.

Family as a Category of Experience

To start, it is important to explain our use of the term "family." *What Is Family?* (Gubrium and Holstein 1990) deliberately put the question in terms of "family," not "the family." We avoided the article "the" because of the risk of framing the question in terms of an ontological space independent of lived experience. Being independent, the family would exist "silently" (Ho's wording), suffusing everyday life whether or not it was recognized and spoken of as such. Precise definition and descriptions of covariations in the family's components, influences, or outcomes would be the research goals. The overall aim would be to represent the family as objectively as possible over and above the everyday epistemological texture of lived experience. Unfortunately, casting the space as primordial can easily lead to the debunking of lived experience, including the disparagement of discursivity (see Woolgar and Pawluch 1985).

Schutz and ethnomethodology do not quarrel with this ontological space but rather set it aside in order to discern and document what in lived experience makes it possible. They neither assert nor question the space. Ethnomethodology in particular would technically bracket ontological concerns with the family as the starting point of concrete research in order to foreground empirically the lived operations or mechanisms that produce and sustain the sense of a separate and distinct reality (see Pollner 1987). The aim is not to deny the existence of social forms such as the family but rather to treat them as "anthropologically strange" for the purpose of documenting real-time methods of reality construction. It is a procedural, not an ontological move.

Ho is impatient with our approach, which also sets the space aside procedurally in order, in our case, to document family's constructed reality. Ho claims that our program is "postmodern" because it casts ontological doubt on the family, rendering the family merely discursive—ephemeral, if nonexistent. He signals his annoyance by citing Richard Day's (2007) characterization of postmodernism as "vague [and] ethereal" and those who practice it as "wispy." But, Ho is mistaken about our position. If family, in our view, is constructively fluid, this does not mean it is nonexistent. Nor are the methods applied for researching it inappropriate or lacking in empirically rigor. (Indeed, the methods are empirically radical if the word "empirical" is understood in its original experiential connotation.)

Ho also fails to understand our modification of the ethnomethodological project. We accept it up to a point, which is why we claim Schutz and ethnomethodology as influences on, not imprimaturs of, our approach. We also find utility in unbracketing the space, not to champion a primordial reality but to bring into view empirically the conditions of possibility for family usage as a category of experience. Where then does this leave "family"? Bracketed, it becomes a categorical space filled with the methods of reality construction. Unbracketed, it becomes the concrete landscape of the familial, a space filled with endless formal and informal configurations of domesticity. As endless unbracketed depictions have shown, "family" has been with us for a long time and is now said to be taking shape in myriad ways.

Our view of family as a category of experience puts the empirical accent on the interplay of the bracketed and the unbracketed—on the respective *hows* and *whats* of family life. Yes, family life is there, so to speak, and has been there for a long time. But, it is experientially significant as a matter of family sui generis only when it becomes categorically relevant as such. We may go on for years living as kindred in the same household—brushing our teeth, disciplining our children, watching television, being bored, eating meals, arguing with each other, happily celebrating holidays together, and becoming estranged, among the endless activities we engage there. But, we may never have a categorical sense that we do all of these things as family matters or as kinds of families. The analytic issue for us is and always has been centered on the question of how these endless activities become matters of family life, sui generis. It is a way of working out Emile Durkheim's alleged aphorism (cf. Garfinkel 2002). As the anecdote at the start of *What Is Family?* suggests, we can brush our teeth, watch television, and quarrel in many places, even with kindred, but is that family? These activities could just as well

be categorized as tyranny, injustice, equality, benevolence, and "just living there," among many other things, not family at all.

If not inculcated in our brains, family comes up repeatedly in life, at times very loudly in talk and interaction. But whether it is more categorically relevant in the household than in other places is another matter. Borrowing Ho's term, it has been our view that family "silences" are broken more outside the home than within—in schools, law offices, courtrooms, and counseling sessions, among diverse locations that empirically give voice to the family presumed to primordially occupy the home. Extending beyond the *hows* of family construction, our program has sought to understand *when* and *where* the categorical talk of family comes up, how that talk is organized, and what the consequences are for those concerned. To argue about a child's unbrushed teeth as a matter of hygiene is one thing; to frame it as a matter of responsible parenting in a divorce proceeding is quite another. The latter can produce a highly audible family, but outside the physical confines of the household, a point we take up next.

Ethnographic Sensibility

Ho elides an important contemporary dimension of the *whats* of family: the element of experiential location. By experiential location, we are referring to where (and when) matters in question, such as brushing teeth, are categorized as family issues. Ho's oversight is peculiar since experiential location is a prominent theme of *What Is Family?,* which Ho cites extensively. The book has an entire chapter titled "Organizational Embeddedness and Family Diversity" that deals with the theme. (Embeddedness refers to venues of family categorization. See Gubrium 1987, 1988 and Gubrium and Holstein 1993, 2001.) Ho also ignores a related article published in the *Journal of Marriage and Family*, which is referenced in the book and that explicitly flags the theme and its methodological imperative, titled "The Private Image: Experiential Location and Method in Family Studies" (Gubrium and Holstein 1987).

The location in which the discursive unfolds makes a difference in the interactional resources for, and categorical conditions of, the construction process—implicating, for example, who is involved and what the stakes and consequences are for those concerned. To construct a family as dysfunctional at a cocktail party in the vernacular of sarcastic psychobabble has different experiential contours, stakes, and consequences than the corresponding description offered in an involuntary commitment hearing (see Holstein 1988) or in a parent effectiveness training session (see Buckholdt and Gubrium [1979] 1985). Analytically attending to the discursive alone is insufficient for sorting this out; we are well aware of the empirical limits of the discursive.

We developed the concepts of experiential location and organizational embeddedness as part of research centered on the social organization of troubles in institutional settings. We were interested in a wide range of organizations as sites for documenting the social construction process, including nursing homes, residential treatment centers for children, family therapy, involuntary commitment hearings, physical rehabilitation, psychiatric treatment, and caregiver support groups. We encountered considerable

family usage along the way, but we also came across the construction of myriad other social forms, including the self, personal identity, stigma, gender, age, the life course, mental competence, dementia, physical fitness, disability, dying, and death.

We have found the situated unfolding of the construction process especially compelling and have demonstrated the importance of cultivating ethnographic insights in studying it. Which came first, then, our interest in the discursive or our ethnographic sensibilities? It is hard to say. As the significance of experiential location for understanding the applications of family as a category of experience became evident, it seemed reasonable to take location into account in documenting related talk and interaction. In any case, the empirical utility of combining an interest in both the *whats* and the *hows* of the construction process became clear. Neither of us started by conducting ethnographic fieldwork in households, which we have always imagined to be a daring and difficult undertaking. Rather, our fieldwork has been located in settings where everyday troubles were called to professional attention, most of which brought the category of family to bear on interpreting the troubles. Key here was the idea that family usage was organizationally embedded; the settings in view varied enormously in how family was understood and how it was claimed to figure in the troubles. To borrow from Bourdieu, the settings of family usage were separate fields of habitus.

Three points underscore the empirical utility of ethnographic sensibility. One is that time and again, it was evident empirically that when family members participated in the various field sites, their initial sense of who and what they were as family members or family writ large was vague. In many instances, they were in a quandary about how family as a category of experience mattered at all in understanding their troubles. Presented troubles were concrete and mundane, such as how loud a TV set was played in the evening, the occasional verbal abuse taken by a wife from her demented husband, or the difficulties of managing a perennially confused adult son or daughter. Rarely, if ever, was family categorically assumed a priori to be a framework for constructing an understanding of the troubles in question.

The second point is that, in contrast, particular sites outside the home had distinctive and clear understandings of family as a category of experience and how that figured in the troubles considered there. This could vary even in a single site where different professional discourses, for example, constructed family in sharp contrast with each other. Family was not so much in anyone's brain, as it was a range of discursive usages—if not a set of institutional habits—for assembling troubles and domestic life in particular ways. To add ethnographic sensibility to Schutz's otherwise apt term, we have found that the "stock of knowledge" that coalesces as "family-as-a-category-of-experience" was not personal or in the brain at all. It was differentially distributed and applied according to the categorical possibilities of a virtual panorama of institutions dealing with related experiences. If there was the semblance of habitus in place, it had organizational contours and rhythms. If there were stocks of knowledge at hand, they were institutionally grounded.

The third point relates to the broader field of social forms that Ho ignores. If family was an important category of experience across the institutional landscape, there were

other categories that competed with it as a means of constructing troubles. Other social forms could dilute the overall centrality of family in these matters. Ho (and presumably Bourdieu) wonders why family comes up repeatedly as a category of experience if it is not primordial. To be sure, family usage is nearly ubiquitous in this interpretive landscape, but so are references to other categories of experience, including gender, age, race, motives, duty, authority, good and bad reasons, and self-control.

Ethnographic sensibility is an important facet of discursive research because it matters empirically where and when family or other social forms are used (or not used) to categorize experience. Ethnographic sensibility guards against overemphasizing the discursive by continuously sensitizing us to the scenic presence or absence of representational categories. While family is not always scripted in so many words, institutions are prepared to instruct us in its warranted usage, something that is not necessarily evident in decontextualized strips of talk and interaction.

A Demonstration of Empirical Utility

An example of the empirical utility of our program necessarily will be brief. The conversational extract presented below is reconstructed from one field study, part of a corpus of ethnographic data gathered over three decades of research in human service institutions (see Holstein and Gubrium 2008a; Gubrium and Holstein 2009). Note in the extract that while family is being commonly referenced by both speakers to categorize experience, its preferred connotation varies considerably in practice. The ethnography of the exchange, not the exchange in its own right, makes this evident. In this case, ethnographic sensibility relates the talk and interaction to the professional perspectives in tow and their organizational linkages.

We will use a truncated phenomenological language to make the argument. The discursive and the institutional combine to contextualize usage. Even in this short extract, the meaning of family as a category of experience is too complex to be captured by concepts such as habitus and prepredicative structures. One aspect of complexity stems from what systematic observation shows discursively, that the substance of family usage is organizationally embedded. A second aspect of complexity stems from the methodical ways speakers in the exchange translate contrasting senses of what is taken to be a common reality—*the* troubles and *the* family in question. A third aspect features the inexorable artfulness of the process.

The field site is a residential treatment center for emotionally disturbed children called Cedarview. Documenting the institutional mediations of the social construction of disturbance was the research goal (Buckholdt and Gubrium [1979] 1985). At the time, emotional disturbance was a term widely used for what has evolved into attention deficit hyperactivity disorder or ADHD, the spectrum of autisms, and Asperger's syndrome, among a range of behavior problem designations for children. Cedarview's treatment program combined an intricate behavior modification regimen with half-day schooling on the grounds, 24-hour residential care for a period of two years, counseling, speech therapy, and recreational activities.

Because the discourse of behavior modification was institutionally mandated, most of the professional staff used its vocabulary for official purposes, applying its principles and justifications in their work and in their decision making. While family life was a constant concern, it was officially construed as a behavioral environment with diverse reward contingencies and outcomes. For all intents and purposes, family was a configuration of stimuli and responses, the behavioral effectiveness of which for children could lead to varied degrees of self-control or emotional disturbance. To use a familiar metaphor, family was preferably a "cool" environment, whose dynamics could be understood in terms of the contingent rationalities of visible activity. In sharp contrast with Christopher Lasch's (1979) contemporaneous concept of family as a "haven in a heartless world," whose warm and supportive interior defended members against the cold realities of life, the effective family in institutional reckoning kept members' emotional lives under control (also see Gubrium 1992).

At the time, psychological services at Cedarview were outsourced to three consultants—one was a behavioral psychologist, another was a psychologist who viewed himself as eclectic, and the third was a child psychiatrist with Freudian inclinations. Consultants were assigned to specific children, and to the extent possible, the consultants followed up only on children assigned to them. While the psychiatrist brought an extra-institutional perspective on family to his exchanges with the regular staff, his opinions and advice were nonetheless admired and valued, shedding light on children's upbringing and emotional lives. In his view, a warm and supportive domestic life was a key to the family's emotional health.

If the consultants' professional vocabularies were different, much of what was heard in their interactions with staff members transpired in the vernacular. All three regularly asked questions such as "What's going on at home?," "Is [she or he] getting their act together?," and "What are the treatment goals here?" At first blush, one would think they all were talking and consulting about the same thing. But, careful attention to what all concerned were doing with words drew a more complex picture centered on the interplay of discursive skill, professional vocabularies, and institutional preferences.

The occasional substitution of one consultant for another in required semiannual psychiatric staffings was especially telling. While Cedarview stressed consistency in consultation, periodically one consultant had to take the place of another because of summer and holiday vacation schedules or other competing obligations. On one such occasion from which the extract is reconstructed, the behavioral psychologist substituted for the psychiatrist. As expected, as the child's progress in treatment was reviewed, he asked questions about the home and family life. When staff members, consulting the case record and recalling earlier reviews, referred to the child's early upbringing and emotional attachments, the consultant asserted his behavioral perspective requesting, that staff members not "get into [family members'] heads," "just stick to what's going on now," and "tell me how he's [the child] being consequented." If conduct can be divided into thinking, feeling, and doing, the consultant had a decided preference for doing. As staff members followed through, the family as a category of

experience for this particular child changed from something resembling the warm interior that Lasch and the consulting psychiatrist had in view, to something closer to cooler institutional reckoning.

This was not an automatic shift in usage but entailed skillful translation. At virtually each and every point of reconstruction, those concerned, including the consultant, engaged in discussions of phenomenological equivalents. If a staff member recalled an emotionally shattered home from the last review or stated that the case record said such-and-such about the child's early upbringing, at this presiding consultant's request, the previous characterization was translated into behavioral equivalents.

Note in particular in the following exchange between a social worker and the consultant that equivalencies are established ad hoc "by rule," that is, with methodical reference to general principles that justify particular characterizations and accounts as equivalent (see Wieder 1970). As questions are asked about what a feature of family that had previously been characterized as emotional means behaviorally, equivalencies are proffered as a way of getting on with the proceedings. The principles invoked provide ad hoc equivalency rules for practical understanding. While the exchange does not show it, the reverse also occurs in such proceedings, where the ad hoc rules as general principles of equivalency are taken as proven in the particulars under consideration, reflexively documenting in turn the empirical grounding of equivalency.

It is also important to mention that as rule use is ad hoc, there is no guarantee of substantive equivalencies across these exchanges. The artfulness of rule use only supports the working assumption that the "family-there" with essential emotional and historical qualities in one exchange will be the "family-there" with behavioral dimensions in another, satisfying the common ontological understanding in place. The constant yet shifting prepredicative reality of the object under consideration is justified and warranted in discursive practice. Mundane as it is, the prepredicative, if not the primordial, reality of family is a work in continuous progress, methodical in a certain respect, artful in another, and silently taken for granted as real by those concerned for all practical purposes.

Social worker: [*Reading from the case record*] Says that the home is pretty shattered emotionally.

Consultant: [*Offering an equivalency rule*] Do you mean everyone's out of control?

The consultant and social worker go on to discuss the phenomenological equivalency of shattered emotions and being out of control, offering different rules for translating the meaning of one into the other, eventually settling, for the time being, on the following rule.

Social Worker: [*Offering another rule*] No, what I mean is just that the parents really feel bad about it and can't seem to get over that. Just that. It's not that things are out of control, more like just deep feelings.

The discussion continues, focusing on what "feeling bad" and "deep feelings" mean in behavioral terms guided by several ad hoc rules for translating these emotions, again settling on a particular rule.

Consultant: [*Offering a rule*] So then they're still adhering to the assignment, making sure Tommy's on task and making sure what the consequences are, right? But they're not exactly happy that it's come to that.

Social Worker: Pretty much, but they're perfectionists and can't seem to handle failure.

At this point, the discussion shifts levels in rule use from the ad hoc presentation of equivalency rules to the invocation of a rule about ruling.

Consultant: [*Offers a rule about ruling*] Okay, let's not get into their heads. [*Referring to a "contracted" or formally agreed upon at-home behavior modification assignment.*] How are the parents handling the contract? That's the point.

Social Worker: They feel they could be doing better. Tommy [*the child*] was never this bad; he was a happy kid until recently. What could have changed? As I said, they're perfectionists. [*Elaborates*]

Consultant: [*Offers another rule about ruling*] Let's never mind that, okay? Feelings aside, they're following through, right?

Social Worker: That's right.

As the conversation oscillates between the provision of equivalency rules and rules for applying rules, along with the case material under consideration, the fluid complexity of the object in view—the family—is apparent. Ordinary as this conversation is, language use shows that the methodical, the artful, and the mundanely essential are working in tandem in assembling the family for the purposes at hand. The prepredicative assumption of the essential reality of family is unshaken, as those concerned do things with words to accomplish, in the practical give-and-take of the here-and-now, the working contours of Tommy's family life. As discursive practice indicates, what family essentially is in one turn at talk is not what family essentially is in another.

What is clear from the Cedarview material is that while the prepredicative structures of the lifeworld are important, they are, by themselves, of limited value for understanding the constructive practices of family as a category of experience. Whatever "pre" there is to the lifeworld is attached to experience in diverse ways in the immediate schemes of things. How "family" is understood experientially is constructed and reconstructed as needed in response to situated knowledge and sited responsibilities. Ethnographically sensitizing concepts such as experiential location and organizational embeddedness show that the discursive is never *just* talk and interaction.

RADICAL OR REFLEXIVE?

Is the Gubrium and Holstein program radical? It has admittedly been informed by Schutz and ethnomethodology, and in that regard is about the lifeworld, categories of experience, and talk and interaction. It appreciates some postmodern sensibilities, such as the fluidity of social life (see Gubrium and Holstein 1997; Holstein and Gubrium 2000b). But, fluidity should not be mistaken for nihilism or the view that anything goes. In fact, the program has a good measure of old-fashioned interest in "things," their institutional bearings, and how related matters are socially organized.

Beyond family, our program has broadly responded to three questions. One is analytic and asks how to develop concepts and a vocabulary that help to understand the everyday realities of contemporary experience. On this front, we have delved into the constructed meanings of personal identity, social problems, inner lives, and social worlds. Pragmatist bearings have encouraged us to be conceptually lean in this mission, adopting a theoretical minimalism. No grand theory of social structure in this corner.

This has led us to the orderly nooks and crannies of lived experience—some as small as informal dyads or groups, and some as large as formal organizations—that provide substantive contexts for constructing who and what we are. This is equally minimalist; no grandiose view of bureaucratic society imposing its rationalities and risks on this front. Experience for us refers to what is happening—to me, to you, to us, and to them in the simultaneous heres and theres of everyday life—some of which is vague, some apparently silent, and some loud and clear, even deafening.

A second question has been procedural. How then do we study and document social life? If contemporary experience is organized in life's nooks and crannies, it is imperative that we enter into them as ethnographic observers to learn what is happening firsthand on site. Certainly, we have listened to people, recorded what they have said, and in many instances examined that interaction very closely, voice-by-voice, turn-by-turn, category-by-category, and theme-by-theme. We also have observed, if not heard, patterns of things left unsaid that have mattered in organizing what is happening. These, too, have been important, crucial to understanding, and as such, we have never limited ourselves to the discursive. This is where ethnographic sensibility comes in.

The third question, which emerged later in the program, returns us to our point of departure but now with the facts in hand. What has the program shown about the lived contours of contemporary life, especially about the structure and organization of experience, troubles in particular? Where are its lived realities? As far as family is concerned, the facts indicate that its contemporary experience is more complex and varied than ever—multilocal, methodically organized, and constructively fluid. As a category of experience, there is now more family than there ever was simply because there are more discursive venues—more nooks and crannies—for constructing it. Family's experiential locations are seemingly endless, hardly limited to its traditional domain, the household.

What is radical about this? (Radical is a loaded word, so we have to be careful here.) Is it radical and therefore of limited value because it seriously deals with the discursive? Decidedly not, since the constructive dimensions of reality are widely acknowledged and

accepted. But, let us turn the tables and ask a derivative question. Is the program radical because it also centers on the substantive *whats* of these matters? Again, decidedly not. (Why does Ho claim that our concern for the discursive is radical, rather than our interest in the contextual, more substantive aspects of social construction?) While prepredicative structures are typically taken to be assuredly there in practice, their practical presence in life requires constructive work, as we hope the preceding extract exemplified. Across the board, we have consistently argued that the discursive is not the sum total of reality construction, just as we have insisted that the circumstances and substantive bearings of reality construction are not self-evident realities. Perhaps the program is radical because it is reflexive and does not fit with someone's ontological preferences. So be it.

NOTES

[1]An "analytics" is different from a theory, although it holds a similar status in constructionist approaches as theory does in nonconstructionist approaches. Since the activity of assembling and concretizing the real and its components is the aim of constructionism, the analytic goal is to conceptualize and document the construction process and its circumstances. This calls for an analytic vocabulary identifying process and circumstance, not a theory about the outcomes of the process.

[2]We have been called postmodernist before, usually suggesting that we adhere to an approach that is empirically ungrounded (see, for example, Prus 1998). While we appreciate many postmodernist sensibilities and draw from work by scholars considered postmodernist, we have consistently offered an analytic approach that attempts to show how concrete social realities are organized (see, for example, Gubrium and Holstein 1998).

[3]Ho is aware of many of our nonfamily publications (which he liberally cites), but the texts appear to be read through the lens of his view of the primordial family.

[4]The terms "reflexive" and "reflexivity" are used in different ways in sociology. We use the terms to convey the mutually constitutive character of everyday discursive activity, and the social circumstances and resources that provide its substantive bearings.

[5]And of course, socialization—the source of habitus—is largely a discursive process further raising question about the claim that meaning is somehow prediscursive.

[6]Bourdieu's (1996) argument that "the family" is a product of the "labor of institutionalization" by "the state" stands in contrast with Dorothy Smith's more empirically nuanced analysis of the institutional reproduction of family. See Smith (1993) for a discussion of the notion of the Standard North American Family and Smith (2005) for a broader view of her program.

[7]There is, perhaps, an explanation for some of our differences with Ho over the use of Garfinkel's ethnomethodology. Melvin Pollner (2012) has recently drawn a distinction between the ethnomethodological program that Garfinkel ostensibly founded (along with Pollner, Harvey Sacks, D. Lawrence Wieder, Don Zimmerman, and Hugh Mehan, among others) and the program that has emerged through Garfinkel's and others' (Michael Lynch and Eric Livingston, just to name two) studies of work. Pollner has called the earlier version "Ethnomethodology Version 1.0" and the latter "Ethnomethodology Version 2.0." According to Pollner, EM 1.0 features making the familiar strange, viewing social action in light of seen but unnoticed background features, an abiding concern with members' practices, avoiding the confusion of analyst/member concepts, ethnomethodological indifference, a critical yet affiliative stance toward sociology, and the

pursuit of reflexivity. The more recent EM 2.0, according to Pollner, seeks to make the strange familiar, focuses on the foreground matters of interest to practitioners, values presence (haecceity), tries to avoid the distortion of member-analyst differentiation, urges ethnomethodological instructiveness, and turns away from radical reflexivity. Clearly, our work resonates with the earlier version (EM 1.0), especially in its incarnations in the work of Pollner, Wieder, Zimmerman, Mehan, Sacks, and others working around the edges of Garfinkelian dogma. By virtue of his citations, we suspect that Ho would be more inclined to value EM 2.0.

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