Social Constructionism and Social Inequality
An Introduction to a Special Issue of *JCE*
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This article highlights two major trends in the social sciences: an increasing concern with inequality and a growing interest in interpretive variability and the creation of meaning. Despite these trends, not enough research treats inequality itself as a meaning that is socially constructed. The article proposes a list of ten ideas useful for guiding research on inequality in a more consistently constructionist direction. Then it introduces the five articles that compose this special issue on social constructionism and social inequality, articles that contribute to the constructionist agenda in varied ways.

**Keywords:** constructionism; inequality; meaning; qualitative methods

There are two recent trends in sociology (and related social sciences) that I think are interesting. The first is an ever-increasing consensus that “inequality” should be the central theme of social research. Concern over inequalities of race, class, gender, and sexual orientation has permeated virtually all subfields. Scholars attempt to trace the causes and consequences of inequality as they connect it to such diverse subjects as the self (L. Anderson and Snow 2001), family (Lareau 2002), education (Mehan 1992), health (Bartley 2003), the environment (Foster 1999), crime (Hagan and Peterson 1995), social control (O’Brien and Jacobs 1998), and religion (Maines and McCallion 2000). Introductory sociology textbooks frequently contain specific chapters on “social stratification,” even while the theme of inequality shapes the other chapters (e.g., M. L. Anderson and Taylor 2001).

**Author’s Note:** I would like to thank Mitch Berbrier, Jim Holstein, and Scott Hunt for commenting on earlier versions of this introductory essay. This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Sociological Society, Minneapolis, Minnesota, April 1, 2005. Please address correspondence to Scott R. Harris, Department of Sociology & Criminal Justice, Saint Louis University, 3500 Lindell Blvd., St. Louis, MO 63103; e-mail: harriss3@slu.edu.
I sometimes wonder, If I were to propose redefining sociology as “the study of social inequality,” would I be far off the mark? Consider the conference themes of the 1998, 2000, and 2002 annual meetings of the American Sociological Association: “Inequality and Social Policy”; “Oppression, Domination, and Liberation”; “Allocation Processes and Ascription.”

There is, however, another major trend in sociology: increasing attention to meaning and interpretation. Qualitative, interpretive approaches to studying social life have proliferated. Symbolic interactionism, ethnomethodology, phenomenology, frame analysis, narrative analysis, discourse analysis, cognitive sociology, cultural studies, postmodernism—these and other interpretive perspectives have gained popularity and some acceptance. Although these approaches are often difficult to define and are sometimes in contradiction with each other, what unites many (but not all) scholars across these perspectives is the recognition of both the relativity and the importance of meaning in social life. The ideas that meaning is not inherent and that meaning is central to social life have captured the imaginations of sociologists and social scientists of many stripes. Scholars increasingly recognize that human beings live in socially constructed realities—in worlds of objects whose meaning is indeterminate until ordered in social interaction. Consider the range of phenomena that have been relativized by constructionist inquiries:

• **The self**: Any person can be defined in innumerable ways. Who we (and others) think we are is not automatic or inherent. People’s identities are achieved in social interaction (e.g., see Gubrium and Holstein 2001; Holstein and Gubrium 2000).

• **Deviance**: No action or trait is inherently deviant. Behavior must be interpreted as deviant to be seen that way (e.g., see Becker 1963/1973, 9; Goode 1994, 100; but also see Pollner’s 1987 critique of Becker).

• **Family**: No set of social ties are inherently familial or nonfamilial. What passes for “family” can differ not only from group to group and individual to individual but can vary for the same individual depending on the context (see Erera 2002, 3; Gubrium and Holstein 1990).

• **Social problems**: States of affairs are not inherently problematic exactly as someone says they are. Any putative social condition can be ignored, considered not to be a problem, or characterized as a problem of type X rather than as a problem of type Y (see Best 2003; Blumer 1971; Holstein and Miller 2003; Loseke 1999; Spector and Kitsuse 1977).

And the list could go on. Across all realms of social life, scholars discover again and again that human beings create the meaning of things. In so doing,
scholars unsettle “common sense” ideas about everything from weight, to tattoos, to food, to animals, to the environment, to the human mind, and so on.

Given these two major trends—the focus on inequality and the interest in the social construction of reality—it is curious that the convergence between them has not been explored as fully as it could be. To be sure, many scholars with constructionist sensibilities are interested in inequality. Their interest, however, tends to center on how interpretations of various related phenomena help create the reality of inequality—as in the argument that beliefs about gender lead to inequality in the workplace. Scholars use constructionist ideas in a truncated fashion, as concepts that help explain the causes and consequences of real inequalities; scholars tend not—at least, not in a consistent, thoroughgoing fashion—to study inequality itself as a socially constructed interpretation (Harris 2004).

One complexity in the argument I am making is that not all social scientists use the phrase social construction in the same way.2 However, among many scholars, there does seem to be some agreement that the central premise of social constructionism is that meaning is not inherent and that the central concerns of constructionist inquiry are to study what people “know” and how they create, apply, contest, and act upon those ideas (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 15; Best 2000, 4; Blumer 1969, 2-5; Gubrium and Holstein 1997, 38). Assuming these are the central premise and concerns of the constructionist perspective on social life in general, I would argue, then, that there should be some fairly standard moves in constructionist research specifically on inequality.

Ten Differences between Constructionist and Nonconstructionist Research on Inequality

I would like to propose the following list as a (nonexhaustive) set of principles that can be used to guide research on inequality in a more thoroughly and consistently constructionist direction.

1. A constructionist researcher would tend to refrain from assuming that inequality is an obvious, objective fact. Instead, they would bracket the existence of inequality in order to better study people’s diverse interpretations of inequality and the social processes involved in creating those interpretations (Harris 2000a, 131; see also Best 2004, 158; Strauss 1995, 11; Travers 1999; Watson and Goulet 1998; Zimmerman and Pollner 1970, 83).

2. Constructionist researchers would tend not to predetermine terms of stratification such as inequality, power, or class. Instead, they would study how
their respondents use and define those terms (Charmaz 2005, 512; Harris 2004, 123-25). If “studying the social construction of inequality” means studying what inequality means to people, and how they create those meanings, then it makes little sense to define inequality (or power, class, etc.) in advance for one’s respondents (Harris 2003b, 206-7).

3. Constructionist researchers would tend to avoid making claims about what they believe to be clear examples of real inequality; instead, they would study how their respondents interpret indeterminate situations as putative examples of inequality (Harris 2004, 125-28).

4. Constructionist researchers would not assume that their first priority is to identify the causes and effects of, and the solutions to, objective inequalities; instead, their main concern would be to study how people create the meaning of inequality by making assertions about its putative causes, effects, and solutions (Harris 2004, 128-30). This constructionist research could be used to aid in the resolution of social problems defined as inequalities, but only if activists were willing to think reflexively about how their claims-making interpretively creates the inequality they seek to reduce (Harris 2000b, 387-90; Harris 2003b, 225; Harris 2004, 132; see also Holstein and Gubrium 2005).

5. Constructionist researchers would tend not to make claims about who are the real victims and victimizers in putatively inegalitarian situations; instead, they would study victimization as an interpretive process whereby people are labeled victim or victimizer (Best 1999; Holstein and Miller 1990; Loseke 1993).

6. Constructionist researchers would tend not to argue with members over the validity of their respective interpretations of inequality (see Pollner 1991, 371). Constructionists’ primary goal is not to prove that one particular interpretation of inequality is the correct one but to study the social processes involved in interpreting situations as unequal. Constructionists do not want to impose inequality meanings onto people’s lives but do want to respect and study the meanings that people live by (Harris 2000b, 378; Harris 2001, 476-77). If constructionists deviate from this tendency, they should do so in a limited, explicit, and cautious fashion (see point 10 below). For example, a constructionist may briefly suggest reasons why a particular respondent’s interpretation may be mistaken, but the main point of his or her study would be to study diverse inequality meanings and how they are made, not to conduct a “sociology of error” (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 12).

7. Constructionist researchers would abstain from proposing their own grand narratives about inequality in social life; instead, they would collect stories about inequality and carefully study them. Constructionists would study in specific detail how narratives of inequality interpretively create the meaning of things—such as the meaning of the actors involved, their motives and constraints, and the overall situation—as well as how those
tales are conditioned by the available cultural resources, the audience, and the interactional goals at hand (Harris 2003b, 222-25). Constructionist analyses of inequality—or at least those interested in the creation of meaning in interaction—would tend to avoid lumping together multiple respondents’ narratives of inequality into a composite picture called “their story” (see Gubrium and Holstein 1997, chaps. 2-3).

8. Constructionists do not consider their research to be constructionist simply because it is qualitative. Rather, constructionists recognize that they need to select respondents, conduct interviews, make observations, and analyze and present their data in ways that are consistent with their constructionist framework. At all these (and other) stages of research, constructionists highlight their respondents’ perspectives and give special attention to the risk of imposing their own inequality meanings onto people’s lives (Harris 2003b, 212, 218; Harris 2004, 124).

9. When constructionists use phrases such as “constructing inequality,” “producing inequality,” and “making inequality,” they explicitly indicate that they are discussing how inequality meanings or interpretations are created, not how the objective reality of inequality is created (Harris 2004, 131-32). Or, at the least, they are careful to differentiate when they are discussing the interpretive versus the objective construction of inequality, and they make the former the primary emphasis of their research.

10. In general, constructionists try to bracket as much of reality as possible—not just the issue of inequality but all of the surrounding context. They attempt to set aside their assumptions in order to study diverse worlds of meaning (Blumer 1969, 11) and the process of assembling those worlds (Pollner 1987, 7). However, constructionists generally recognize that they cannot and should not try to bracket everything at once (Best 1993). Consequently, they try to be careful, parsimonious, explicit, and strategic as they import realist assumptions into their analyses, and do so principally to highlight the contextual factors that shape (and are shaped by) interpretation (Holstein and Gubrium 2003, 2005).

Elsewhere, I have attempted to demonstrate how these sorts of guidelines tend not to be followed by quantitative researchers (Harris 2000a) or by qualitative, interactionist researchers (Harris 2003b, 2004)—even though both sets of scholars often express interest in studying some aspects of their respondents’ perceptions. By focusing on the subfield of marriage, I have tried to show how a more rigorously constructionist approach can be more sensitive to the full diversity of inequality meanings that people may actually live by (Harris 2006). Standard practice in marital research is for scholars to decide how to define, measure, and explain the causes and effects of inequality in marriage. Although there may be some recognition of the interpretive complexities associated with inequality—such as when researchers debate
whether certain actions are really indicators of “household labor” (Coleman 1988; Shaw 1988) or of “decision making power” (Kranichfeld 1987; Safilios-Rothschild 1970)—that has not prevented scholars from heavy-handedly imposing meanings onto their respondents’ lives. To make coherent sociological arguments about the precursors, extent, and consequences of (real) inequality, the objectivist inequality researcher seems obligated to settle on one particular way of conceptualizing the phenomenon: “To be equal, spouses must share decision making power”; or, “Marital equality means splitting the housework evenly.” But settling on one version of inequality also tends to preclude any enduring interest in the diverse kinds of inequalities that may appear in the subjective lives of respondents. What if a spouse does not consider her unequal marriage a problem with power or the division of labor but some other issue—such as sex, communication, religion, housing, lifestyles, intelligence, and so on (Harris 2006)?

An enduring awareness of the “ambivalence of the meaning of all social phenomena” (Schutz 1964, 227) and an abiding concern for respondents’ experienced sense of inequality leads in a different direction: cautiously investigating inequality meanings and the practices that create them. In particular, I have suggested that Schutz’s (1964) concepts of domains of relevance and typifications can be used to highlight the way people select and convert indeterminate elements of experience into recognizable patterns of marital equality and inequality. Power, the division of labor, and other issues can be seen not as objective properties of marriages (waiting “out there” to be found) but as broad narrative themes that individuals use to link together a series of ambiguous actions and events. Sometimes, social actors will employ familiar sociological themes (such as “power”) to interpret and narrate events in their lives (as when they define “interrupting during a conversation” as an example of dominance); however, they will likely do so in selective, idiosyncratic, spontaneous ways that are responsive to the context and the social expectations at hand (Harris 2006, chap. 4). Other times, actors will employ less familiar themes—plot lines that are ignored or not favored by sociologists—as they make sense of their situations (Harris 2006, chap. 5). Thus, by humbly inquiring about what inequalities matter to people, and how those inequalities are made evident, researchers can gain a better understanding of social inequalities as they actually appear in members’ lived experiences.

I think there are clear parallels that can be drawn from the study of marriage to the study of inequality in all areas of social life (Harris 2004, 2006). Sociologists—whether quantitative, qualitative, Marxist, functionalist, or feminist—all regularly assume that it is primarily their perogative, not
members’, to identify, measure, and explain inequality. This conventional assumption frequently shows up in confident, seemingly unremarkable statements such as, “The distribution of income and wealth has become increasingly unequal since 1970” (Collins 2000, 17) and “Cross-region inequality has . . . increased significantly” (Chang 2000, 242-43). It also shows up when scholars begin their research with one or more predetermined issues in mind, such as when a researcher treats class, gender, and race as omni-relevant forms of inequality. And finally, the conventional assumption shows up when scholars find and explain “examples” of inequality by making causal linkages to the self-organizing dynamics of capitalism, to purposefully exploitive relations, or to unintended consequences (e.g., Foster 1999).

“But so what?” some readers may wonder. What’s wrong with conventional approaches? Why pay attention to the stories of respondents who may be clueless about the actual inequalities that profoundly, if unknowingly, shape their lives?

One way to answer those kinds of questions is to recall Blumer’s (1969) first premise of symbolic interactionism: human beings act based on what things mean to them, so to understand their behavior it is important to investigate those meanings. Although “objective” sociological hierarchies may be empirically demonstrable and thoroughly “documented” (cf. Garfinkel 1967, 78-79), their influence and effects will still tend to be mediated by the interpretations of the actors who confront those putative conditions (Blumer 1969, 87-88). Another way to respond is to invoke Spector and Kitsuse’s (1977, 70-71) distinction between sociologists as analysts of versus participants in social problems claims-making. As this contrast indicates, sociologists always have a choice between studying the process of defining social problems and engaging in the process of defining social problems. When researchers make assertions about the real extent, causes, and consequences of social problems, or when they assess the validity of members’ claims, they risk losing sight of the interpretive processes that create those problems in the first place.

Although it may be impossible (see Best 1993) to attend “solely to the definitions of members” as Spector and Kitsuse (1977, 63 [emphasis added]) suggest, their advice to remain mindful of the analyst/participant distinction still seems helpful and applicable. Sociologists who study inequality, compared with other topics, do not exhibit as much awareness of their participation in the construction of their research subject. For example, most sociologists would probably be fairly self-conscious about dictating to their research participants what a family really is or what is really deviant behavior. It is widely recognized that what passes as “family” and as “deviant” varies dramatically
by time and place (Becker 1963/1973; Erera 2002; Goode 1994; Gubrium and Holstein 1990; Stockard 2002). When it comes to stratification and inequality, though, sociologists tend to demonstrate less awareness of the relativity of the phenomenon in question; they exhibit less sensitivity to or interest in the potentially diverse meanings of inequality. Sociologists have generally resisted adopting the premise that “nothing is inherently unequal,” even while they have often embraced the premise that “nothing is inherently deviant” and “the ‘family’ is a social construction” (Harris 2003a; Harris 2004).

This reluctance to rigorously apply a constructionist sensibility to inequality probably stems in part from sociologists’ desire not to de-legitimate the problem of inequality. If inequality is “just” a social construction, doesn’t that mean that we (sociologists and laypersons) have to take it less seriously? Admittedly, the constructionist perspective does have the potential to take the “affective starch” out of social problems by depicting them as matters of interpretation and choice rather than self-evident social ills (Gusfield 1984, 45). However, this need not be the case. As Joel Best (2000) might say, there is no need to add the word just to the sentence “Inequality is (just) a social construction.” Though it is common practice in some academic circles (Best 2000), adding the seemingly harmless just actually fosters an unfortunate and misleading idea: that things that are socially constructed are completely imaginary.

Some scholars, Best has argued, have been prone to study phenomena that are based on clearly discreditable or unwarranted ideas, such as witchcraft. Problems such as these may be referred to as “just” social constructions, implying that whereas they have virtually no empirical basis whatsoever, other problems are plainly real and hence unconstructed (Best 2000). But social constructionism is not an approach that applies only to (what are thought to be) nonexistent entities or fallacious ideas. If “the social construction of reality” is the process through which knowledge is created and classifications are applied (Berger and Luckmann 1966, 15; Best 2000, 4), then everything is socially constructed. Presumably fanciful, nonexistent phenomena (such as witches) as well as serious phenomena (such as rape or poverty) both become recognizable features of the world through processes of social construction. Images, understandings, and depictions of both kinds of phenomena arise out of particular social contexts and practices.

Clearly, then, I am not arguing that the empirical situations that scholars label “unequal” are fanciful delusions. There is a somewhat obdurate (though indeterminate) world out there (see Blumer 1969, 22-23). Yet, at the same time, I do want to argue that it is important to study the meaning-making work involved with the identification and explanation of these and other sorts
of inequalities. It is important to study inequality-as-claims-making activity for the same reasons that constructionists have always used to justify their research: to try to capture what other approaches have missed and to add a dose of self-consciousness to efforts to understand and reduce problematic states of affairs (Blumer 1971; Holstein and Gubrium 2005; Holstein and Miller 2003; Loseke 1999; Spector and Kitsuse 1977). By doing so in a sustained, rigorous way, constructionists can make a unique and valuable contribution to one of the most prominent areas of research in sociology: inequality.

Overview of the Special Issue

The articles in this special issue all express constructionist sensibilities in different ways and to different degrees. The authors focus on somewhat different subjects and work from different perspectives. However, they all have tried to avoid (and have encouraged others to avoid) imposing inequality meanings onto respondents’ lives. What is shared across these authors’ work is an attempt to focus attention on what inequality means to actors themselves, as well as how those meanings are created, even when inequality is not an explicit subject of actors’ talk.

The first article, by Tim Berard, draws from ethnomethodological and Wittgensteinian scholarship to provide a broad statement on the study of inequality. In “From Concepts to Methods: On the Observability of Inequality,” Berard encourages more researchers to respecify inequality as a member’s concern rather than an analytical resource. Berard provides a constructionist theoretical perspective as well as three empirical examples as he reorients research toward the “essentially meaningful nature of inequality” in conversation and social interaction.

The second article in this issue employs constructionist concepts from the literature on social problems and social movements to analyze a controversy over discrimination on a major university campus. In “When Is Inequality a Problem?” Mitch Berbrier and Elaine Pruett argue that scholars should distinguish between the construction of inequality as troubling and the construction of inequality as an acceptable state of affairs. Through their case study of the establishment of the Office of Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Student Support Services at Indiana University, Berbrier and Pruett indicate how inequality is not in and of itself a social or public problem. Inequality can be claimed, perceived, or assumed to exist while not simultaneously conceived as unjust or immoral. Berbrier and Pruett highlight the distinction between claims that assert or imply the existence of “just” inequalities and
claims that assert or imply the existence of “unjust” inequalities as they analyze claims-makers’ use of the notions of “minority” and “victim.” Like Berard, Berbrier and Pruett draw far-reaching implications from their article, but they do so (in part) by connecting their case study to the interpretive frames found in larger national debates over gays in the military.

In the third article, Jenny Stuber explicitly combines naturalist and constructionist (Gubrium and Holstein 1997; Harris 2003b) approaches to qualitative research in her work on perceptions of social class. In “Talk of Class: The Discursive Repertoires of White Working- and Upper-Middle Class College Students,” Stuber analyzes her in-depth interviews with sixty college students from two different settings: a large public university and a small private college. Drawing respondents from these two settings helps Stuber compare and contrast the boundary work (Lamont and Molnar 2002) of working and upper-middle class students as they interpret the significance of class on campus.

By coincidence, the last two articles of this special issue both focus on coffee shops but do so with different interests in mind. Besen’s article—“Exploitation or Fun? The Lived Experience of Teenage Employment in Suburban America”—exhibits the constructionist tendency to question the confidence with which analysts propound totalizing narratives about work and inequality. Besen takes issue with authors such as Ritzer (2000), whose sweeping portraits of employment sometimes obscure the diverse ways that individuals may interpret the same set of work conditions. Besen’s article shows that members of a setting (in this case, youth workers at a well-known coffee shop) may define and experience their jobs in ways that contradict scholarly, objectivist analyses of the inequalities “inherent” to such service work.

In “A Place in Town,” Yodanis also focuses on a coffee shop, but her attention is directed at the customers and the ways they create and negotiate class and status distinctions. Drawing inspiration from West and Fenstermaker’s (1995) ethnomethodological perspective on “doing difference,” Yodanis describes the verbal and nonverbal strategies that three groups of women use to signify their class standing (upper, middle, lower). Like Besen, Yodanis also draws on interviews as well as ethnographic field notes. But where Besen uses her research to document the lack of a perception of inequality, Yodanis uses hers to document a pervasive (if often implicit) concern with inequality—concern that does not always accord with what more objectivist scholars might predict, however.

I am proud to have worked with the authors of each of these articles, and I thank them for their participation. I hope the readers of this special issue enjoy the fruits of their efforts.
Notes

1. I would argue that some of the recent “turns” that social scientists mention—such as the qualitative turn, the narrative turn, the interpretive turn, the postmodern turn—all (to some degree) point to this second major trend. However, I recognize that not all scholars (who are qualitative, interpretive, etc.) would want to be placed within the broad “trend” that I am attempting to describe.

2. For examples, see my point number 9 (below) as well as Harris 2004, pages 131-132.

3. This is true with generally one exception: constructionists do propose the grand narrative that everything—including inequality—is socially constructed.

4. Holstein and Gubrium (2003) provide an excellent overview of, and approach for dealing with, constructionists’ need to import (temporarily and strategically) realist assumptions into their analyses.

References


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