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Far from “Anything Goes”: Ethics as Communally Constructed

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Constructivist and constructionist stances have long been critiqued for inviting “anything goes,” otherwise referred to as “rampant relativism.” As Raskin and Debany ([this issue](#)) argue, there could be nothing further from the case. In my response to their article, I take up three issues: (a) the distinction between constructivism and social construction, (b) the critique of rampant relativism, and (c) the case for an ethic of relational responsibility that emerges within a constructionist philosophical stance.

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION AND CONSTRUCTIVISM

There are a good deal of overlapping interests and concerns among (some) constructivists and (some) constructionists. Primary, of course, is the premise that we construct reality. Where our differences emerge is in the interface of assuming that reality is constructed, and developing an argument concerning the locus of that construction. Von Glasersfeld’s (1995) radical constructivism viewed “human constructions as *personal and private*” (Raskin & Debany, [this issue](#), emphasis added), whereas “Kelly’s personal construction psychology focuses on how people create individualized systems of bipolar meaning dimensions (i.e., personal constructs) that they use to anticipate events (Raskin & Debany, [this issue](#)). To the constructivist, reality construction is a private, mental process that is “triggered” (Raskin & Debany, [this issue](#)) by engagement in the social and physical world.

Constructionists, on the other hand, see reality construction as a purely social process. This means that constructionists reject the idea of a private mental process. This distinction is significant, even if there are many congenial overlapping threads between the two perspectives.

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How Can Constructionists Ignore Mental Process?

Constructionists shift the focus from an examination of individuals and their mental (construing) processes to social interaction, or what is commonly referred to as relational processes. We could also say that constructionists shift from a psychology of meaning making to a communication perspective on meaning making (Pearce, 2007). This shift has also been referred to as “the linguistic turn” (Rorty, 1967), which draws on the work of Wittgenstein (1953) and others. Saussure (1916/1974) pointed out that the relationship between a word and an object (or action) is arbitrary. This shift in focus from the correspondence between the external world and thought to language practices¹ implies that it is what people do together within specific environments that crafts reality, not how people build up mental constructs. What is critical to the constructionist is the *communal construction of reality*. And it is precisely this point that guards against rampant relativism.

ANYTHING GOES?

The rampant relativist critique (anything goes) is a hardline talking point for those who oppose constructionist ideas. It also unveils a lack of understanding about the philosophical premises of a constructionist orientation. Let me address this misunderstanding.

Although we recognize that meaning—and therefore reality—is created in what people do together, that does not imply, or even lightly suggest, that we can make up anything we want about the world. This is where critics make their biggest mistake. We live within traditions that are culturally, relationally, and environmentally situated. Within those traditions—or interpretive communities, as Wittgenstein (1953) would call them—there are established forms of practice, established meanings, and established expectations. These established ways of being are the byproduct of coordinated actions among people who are operating within traditions and ways of talking and acting they have inherited.

As people coordinate their activities with others, patterns or rituals quickly emerge. These rituals generate a sense of standards and expectations that we use to assess our own and others’ actions. Once these standardizing modes are in place, the generation of values and beliefs (a moral order) is initiated. Thus, from the simple process of coordinating our activities with each other, we develop entire beliefs, moralities, and values. Of course, the starting point for analysis of any given moral order (reality) is not restricted to our simple relational coordinations. We can equally explore patterns of interaction or the sense of obligation (standards and expectations) participants report in any given moment. We can also start with the emergent moral orders, themselves (dominant discourses as many would call them), and engage in a Foucauldian archeology of knowledge (1969), in which we examine how certain beliefs, values, and practices originally emerged, which returns us to the simple coordinations of people and environments in specific historical, cultural, and local moments. In some ways, I see this as a social/relational articulation of Raskin and Debany’s ([this issue](#)) ontological construing in the sense that we make a reality in our interactions. The relational process of creating a worldview can be illustrated as follows:

All visualizations are limiting. This, of course, is not meant to portray an individual’s mental processes. This is a simplified way of illustrating the relation among coordinated actions, emergent patterns, a sense of expectations, and the creation of dominant discourses (moral or-

ders). And, as we can see below, different communities can and will construct incommensurate realities.

Because we all participate in many different local traditions and communities, the possibility for negotiating diverse and multiple understandings of any given phenomenon is always present. This is the relativist position of constructionist thinking and can be portrayed as follows:

As we can see, this is far from an anything goes position. It is the communities, traditions, and relations within which we live and act that keep constructionists from slipping into an anything goes mentality. This is precisely what Garfinkel (1967) explained. We index negotiated ways of acting in order to achieve a sense of “rationality.” In other words, we work hard to maintain the social order.

It is the responsiveness of persons to one another and to their environment that comes to create what we “know,” what we “understand,” and what we believe to be “real.” The continual coordination required in any relationship or community eventually generates a sense of taken-for-granted, common practices.

Unlike constructivists, constructionists view “thinking” and “knowing” as ultimately relational. Remember, to the constructionist, focus is placed on what people do together (language practices). Wittgenstein put it well, “The limits of my language mean the limits of my world” (1961, 5.6). Following Bakhtin (1981), private mental processes are viewed as “inner dialogue.” Without language, there can be no thought. And, because language emerges in what people do together, we have no need to resort to some inner, private construal process to understand meaning making. The inside/outside dichotomy is replaced in social construction with the coordinated activities of persons in relation.

A Word on Realism

Raskin and Debany ([this issue](#)) discuss how critics of constructivism and constructionism claim that by acknowledging knowledge of something, we are realists. They claim, “There is nothing inconsistent about this. It is perfectly reasonable to treat one’s constructions as referencing a world ‘out there.’” The constructionist would agree. In fact, to the constructionist, there is a world out there. It is the physical world of matter. However, harking back to Saussure’s contribution, there is nothing about that world of matter that requires we name it one way or another. The constructionist (and the constructivist) would not disagree that an object made of metal, rubber, plastic, and leather that transports a person from one place to another exists. But whether this object (car) is constructed as useful, environmentally damaging, or dangerous and death-enhancing is a matter of social negotiation. And, as we have seen, different communities—people living in different eras and cultures—are likely to negotiate different meanings for material objects. Similarly, abstract notions such as justice, love, freedom, and equality will be constructed differently due to specific and contextualized interactive processes of participants.

To claim, as critics do, that constructionists and constructivists say there is no reality (or say reality is “just” a construction) is, frankly, absurd. The point is not whether there is a reality or not. The point is *who gets to decide what reality is in any given moment?* Whose standards (see [Figure 1](#)) apply? Who is silenced and who has a voice? Rather than claim there is no reality, the claim proposed by constructionists and constructivists is that there are multiple realities, and these realities are granted coherence and rationality within community, tradition, and culture.

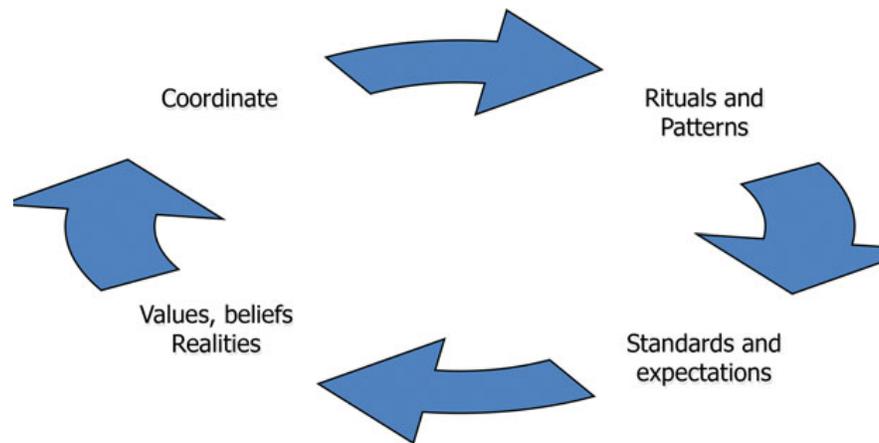


Figure 1. The process of meaning making.

A Word on Discourse

Raskin and Debany ([this issue](#)) address another misunderstood aspect of social construction: discourse. They say, “The ... concern touches on something interesting—namely, the apparent contradiction that we simultaneously are determined by and free of our discourses.” Quoting Burr (2003) and Held (1998), they go on to note that constructionism sees people as “the unwitting victims of socially constructed discourses ... mere vessels carrying and perpetuating discourses that have been poured into them ... [but who] can readily abandon these discourses and simply choose new ones at will.”

In order to dispel this view, one must understand the constructionist notion of discourse. Because constructionists focus on interactive processes (commonly referred to as language) rather than on individual mental processes (cognition), discourses are byproducts of what people do together. What we refer to as *dominant discourses* are nothing more than the taken-for-granted ways of maintaining the social order. The social order emerges from what people do together. It is constructed. This means all that we take for granted (e.g., that people will stop at a red light) is maintained by an often (but not always) unspoken social contract. It is amazing to think about this. Some people eat three meals a day, because that’s what you are supposed to do in their world. Children go to school because that’s what they are supposed to do (and after constructing this dominant discourse, it becomes law). This *coordinated, negotiated* social order hinges entirely on our participating in its maintenance. Thus, the social order or dominant discourses we take for granted are fragile.

Change, from this perspective, emerges in a couple of ways. Change occurs when a subcommunity begins to question the taken-for-granted way of being. A good example is the women’s movement. Yet, as we well know, one woman alone could not and did not alter the dominant patriarchal order. Change happens in community. Change also occurs when diverse communities come together. We need only look historically to see the rampant transformation of the meaning of family, community, organizations, healthcare, and so on as associated with the increasing ability of cultures and communities to move and share resources. As one small illustration: Many people,

as well as medical practitioners, now see value in homeopathic treatments. For them, scientific medicine vs. homeopathic remedies is no longer a battle over competing discourses.

But important to note here is that what we call dominant discourses (i.e., taken-for-granted ways of being in the world that “most” people see as truth or fact) are only maintained by the situated discursive practices of people interacting. Burr (2015) identified Foucault’s work as emblematic of what she called macro social construction. She said this view of discourse (dominant discourses) “emphasizes the way that the forms of language available to us set limits upon, or at least strongly channel, not only what we can think and say, but also what we can do or what can be done to us” (p. 73). An example of a dominant discourse might be (in our culture) that all children should attend school until they are 18 years of age. Alternatively, Burr claims that discursive psychology (micro social construction) “emphasizes the capacity of the speaker to draw upon language as a cultural resource for his or her own ends” (p. 73). For example, some children may be homeschooled, some attend private schools, some attend public schools, some attend alternative schools, and so on.

What Burr omitted in her detailed description is that the macro- and micro- cannot be separated. They are part of a whole. If, for example, the majority of a community ignored the practice of school attendance, the dominant discourse that children must attend school would cease to exist for that community. One must ask the question, “Where do dominant discourses come from?” The answer to that question, as demonstrated in this example and Figure 1, is from the everyday, coordinated activities of people in relation to each other and their environments. This point is critical, as it addresses the naïve critique that we can “choose new ones (discourses) at will” (Raskin & Debany, [this issue](#)). And, as Latour and Woolgar (1979) point out, even what we take to be “scientific fact” is so because a community of scientists have agreed.²

The important distinction here—and I would add that it is a marked distinction between constructionism and constructivism—is that it is *not* individuals constructing meaning (as in constructivism); meaning is constructed in the coordinated actions of people in specific contexts. The emphasis on coordinated action (as opposed to mental constructions) prohibits choosing a discourse “at will.” We are constrained by both the taken-for-granted social order (dominant discourses) within which we live and the moment-to-moment interactive processes in which we engage. The two are recursively related.

RELATIONAL RESPONSIBILITY: A CONSTRUCTIONIST ETHIC

A relational ethic centers attention not on individuals and their isolated actions but on relational processes of engagement. In other words, a relational ethic focuses on what people do together and what their “doing” makes. Thus, there is—by necessity—a relative nature to ethics. I refer to this relational ethic as *relational responsibility* (McNamee & Gergen, 1999). Relational responsibility differs from individual responsibility. It is not focused on what isolated individuals are (or are not) doing; instead, it is focused on the process of relating itself. Rather than blame or judge or evaluate an individual’s actions in isolation, a relational constructionist ethic urges us to ask what our *interactive processes* are creating. Or, as Pearce (2007) put it, “What are we making together, how are we making this together, who are we becoming as we make this, and how do we make better social worlds?” (p. 53). Although it appears that the message of a relational ethic is anything goes, as I have argued, this could not be further from the truth. It is not the case that

anything goes when we confront the question of ethical ways of being. All forms of being, all actions, make sense in context. The question is this: Who decides what the definitive context shall be?

By illustrating the process by which a sense of ethics (what we value) emerges (Figure 1), the active part we all play in the creation of dominant worldviews is made visible. It is important to remember that this is a relational process—these are participants working *together* to create a world. This is not to suggest that all parties always have an equal voice. It is, however, to point out, as Foucault did, that the power differentials that are continually reconstructed in, for example, the therapeutic conversation are relationally crafted. It is not simply the case that therapists (with their expertise) have power over clients. Rather, clients, in their *participation* in the therapeutic encounter, contribute to the continual construction of the professional expertise of therapeutic discourse. Clients seek therapy because this practice has been “normalized” by the simple process of relational coordination and, in seeking therapy, they participate in maintaining therapy as a valued resource for certain circumstances.

An ethic of relational responsibility provides us with the reflexive capacity to question common practices and to contest their “truth status.” A relational ethic also embraces difference and complexity, eschewing the search for standardized practices. I believe this is what Raskin and Debany (this issue) are suggesting with their notion of epistemological construing. Rather than finalize our understanding of the world once it has been negotiated (see Figure 1)—a relational alternative to Raskin and Debany’s (this issue) ontological construing—a constructionist, relational ethic is one of recognizing the many different communities and their different ways of making meaning of the same phenomena (e.g., Figures 2 and 3)—what Raskin and Debany (this issue) refer to as epistemological construing.

As relational beings, the communities and traditions that inform our understanding of the world (our moral orders) will likely be incommensurate with the worldviews of others. As we shift our attention to the notion of a relationally crafted ethic, we are invited to see and to recognize how

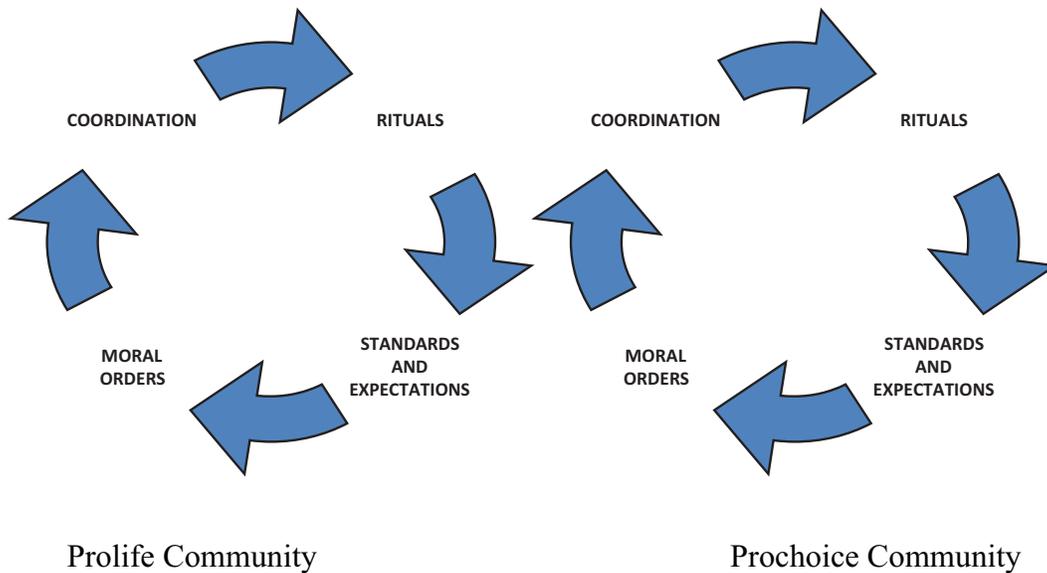


Figure 2. Different discursive communities.

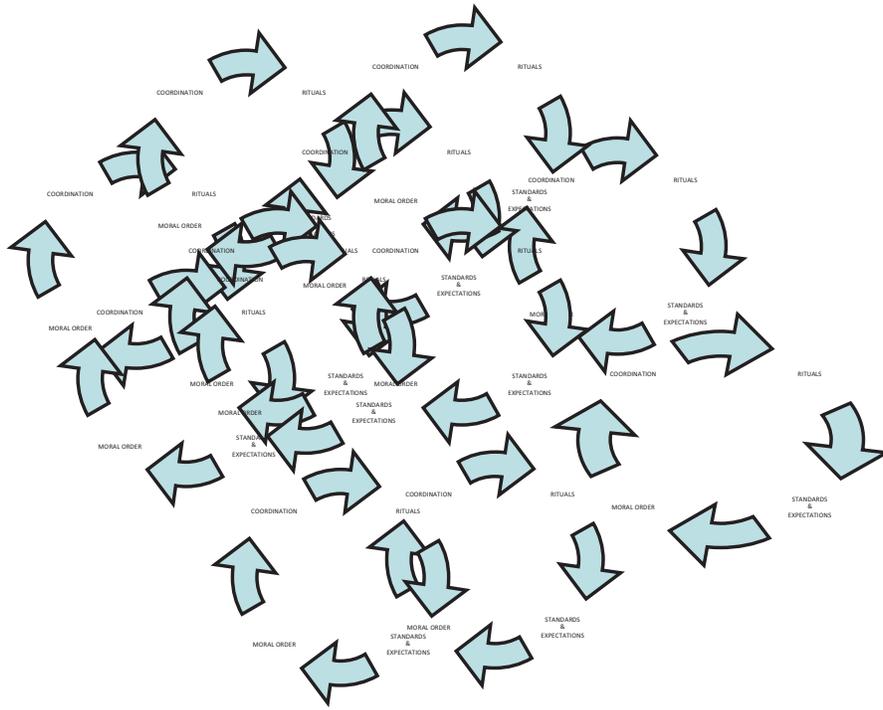


Figure 3. Multiple discursive communities.

a traditional view of ethics is *also* the byproduct of relational coordination. The difference, however, is that rather than champion a dislocated code of ethics as the truth, our relational focus provides us with the resources for seeing a standardizing ethical code as coherent within a particular community (i.e., usually a specific professional community, such as the law, healthcare, mental health, education). Our challenge is to respect the professional code of ethics to which we are bound and simultaneously maintain respect and curiosity for the diverse and complex moral orders created in the lives of those with whom we work. Important to note here is that the potential for incommensurate life worlds is enormous. Furthermore, as each of us is immersed in multiple communities simultaneously (Figure 3), the potential for difference is expanded even further. Each of us embodies multiple and often contradictory and/or incommensurate moral orders.

We live in language; this is what distinguishes us from other creatures. Language provides us with the ability to be reflexive—to question ourselves and imagine alternative forms of action; to engage in epistemological construing (Raskin & Debany, [this issue](#)). With an ethic of relational responsibility, we can attempt to coordinate multiple moral orders and imagine a future that is relationally sensitive. We can harness the potential of coordinating differences to move beyond simple solutions, universal resolutions, and our desire to eliminate difference once and for all. An ethic of relational responsibility sensitizes us to the contextual and relational nuances of daily life and thereby avoids decontextualized, legalized ethical judgments.

Such an ethic demands that we embrace the contingent nature of meaning. Interactive processes unfold. As we interact in the world, the sense of what we *should* be doing or what we *might* do shifts. The moral character of everyday life rests on the contingent quality of our conversational engagements, couched as they are within dominating discourses of right and

wrong, and thus those engagements—those interactive processes—become our necessary focus of attention.

A relational ethic directs our attention to how we might create opportunities for different conversations, ones built on curiosity in which we can search for local coherence, for the stories, culture, and values that ensure we avoid abstract judgments. With an ethic of relational responsibility, we can attempt to coordinate multiple moral orders and imagine a future that is relationally sensitive. We can harness the potential of coordinating differences to move beyond simple solutions, universal resolutions, and our desire to eliminate difference once and for all.

NOTES

1. It is important to note that the focus on language practices is *not* limited to words and text. To the constructionist, all embodied activity is “language” and thus, it is social interaction or relational processes that become focal in our understanding of the social world.
2. For an interesting articulation of this view, see the TED Talk by Naomi Oreskes (2017).

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