



An Introduction to Constructionism for Qualitative Researchers in Business and Management¹

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An Introduction to Constructionism for Qualitative Researchers in Business and Management¹

Gina Grandy

Introduction

We are all constructionists if we believe that the mind is active in the construction of knowledge.
(Schwandt, 2000, p. 189)

What really exists is not things but things in the making. (James, 1909/1996, p. 263, in Tsoukas & Chia, 2002, p. 567)

There are a number of variations and interpretations of constructionism that influence the work of qualitative researchers. As noted by Gubrium & Holstein (2008) in their *Handbook of Constructionist Research*, 'constructionism now belongs to everyone and to no one – a highly variegated mosaic of itself' (p. 4). My intent with this chapter is not to present an exhaustive review of constructionism for qualitative researchers in organization studies – there are various sources already available which do this well (see for example, Cunliffe, 2008; Fairhurst & Grant, 2010; Samra-Fredericks, 2008). Rather, my desire here is to offer a particular reading of constructionism that draws from my own lived experiences – deriving from my own questions, challenges, reflections and development – to assist those relatively new to constructionism. In line with a social constructionist approach, I am writing myself into the chapter and this means what is to follow is both enriched and limited by my own interpretations, experiences and preferences.

It is difficult to speak of the roots of constructionism because the influences and streams of thinking are so diverse. I suggest it might be better to think of it as a web of influences, comprised of interconnected thinkers, theories, perspectives, research strategies and methods. For example, influential thinkers range from Weber, Durkheim, Marx, Gergen, Goffman, Berger and Luckmann, to Shotter, and related theories range from symbolic interactionism and sensemaking to postmodernism. Constructionism is suited to a diverse range of research methodologies (e.g. action research, ethnography, grounded theory) and methods (e.g. observation, interviews, narratives). Constructionism underpins studies in leadership (see Fairhurst & Grant, 2010, for a conceptual overview, or Grandy & Śliwa, 2015, for a qualitative empirical study), identity (Alvesson, 2010; Grandy, 2008; Thomas & Linstead, 2002), gender (Mavin & Grandy, 2016a, 2016b), entrepreneurship (Downing, 2005; Fletcher, 2006; Refai et al., 2015), management learning (e.g. Corlett, 2013; Larsen & Ø Madsen, 2016; Ramsey, 2013) and strategy (Grand et al., 2015; Mir & Watson, 2000), among others. Given that this chapter is in many ways one distinct to my experiences of constructionism, it seems fitting to first provide the reader with an overview of the key aspects of constructionism that inform my work as a qualitative researcher in business and management.

Following Lincoln & Guba (2000), I understand constructionism to be *a perspective or research paradigm* whereby individuals continually construct and negotiate meanings to make sense of experiences. Constructionism is *dialectical*; marked by tensions and complexities because of the opposing yet inseparable nature of subjective and objective realities,² static and processual realities, subjective and objective knowing, and self in-relation-to-others. It envelops *relativism* in the sense that local and specific multiple realities exist, but also *realism* in that political, cultural, social and historical contexts through which such realities are constructed reproduce material effects. Meaning making is also *intersubjective* and *processual*; it is both personal and shared, shaped by one's experiences of self and self in-relation-to-others, and it is temporal and fluid. As a constructionist researcher, I *co-construct* the meanings and interpretations that are negotiated and re-told through my research. I am not a bias to the research, although I do bear a *moral responsibility* to be *reflexive* about how my life experiences and engagement with those whom I encounter in the research process become interwoven in the meaning making process that is re-presented as the experiences of others.

As we move through the chapter I will share with the reader how I have grappled with various questions and challenges that led to such an understanding and how such assumptions emerge through my own qualitative research. In what follows I organize the content around three areas: constructionism under various labels; constructionism as ontology, epistemology and research paradigm; and intersubjectivity, co-construction and reflexivity. Throughout these sections I weave in empirical examples. Towards the end of chapter, I will also include an extended example from my PhD work with the goal to provide the reader with transparent illustrations of how philosophical assumptions of constructionism can transpire in empirical qualitative research in business and management.

Am I a Constructionist, Social Constructionist, Relational Constructionist or Constructivist?

In her work on opportunity and new business venturing, Fletcher (2006) delineates between social constructivism and social constructionism. Generally speaking, for her, constructionism is more about 'the relationality between people, institutions, material objects, physical entities and language, rather than the private sense-making activity of particular individuals' (p. 422). She links social constructivism to Vygotsky (1981) and Bruner (1990), whereby 'individual, subjective knowing' (p. 431) is privileged but attention is still given to socio-cultural practices. Constructivism is also often traced back to George Kelly's personal construct theory (see Raskin, 2002). Social constructionism, however, draws more closely from Berger and Luckmann's (1966) work and considers more fully the 'examination of the interplay between agency and structure linking individual constructions of sense-making and enactment to the societal level through processes of structuration (Bouchiki, 1993; Zafirovski, 1999; Bruyat and Julien, 2001; Goss, 2005)' (p. 426). Crotty (2003) makes a similar distinction and emphasizes how constructionism focuses upon the 'collective generation of meaning' (Schwandt, 1994, p. 127; as cited in Crotty, 2003). Crotty (2003) also notes that social constructionism embraces the critical spirit and 'the hold that culture has on us', while 'constructivism tends

to resist the critical spirit' (p. 58).

In one of my meetings with my PhD supervisor I recall her asking me if I could differentiate between constructionism and constructivism, and where did 'social' fit into my philosophical understanding. Those questions were important in helping me to grapple with my interpretation of constructionism and its ontological and epistemological assumptions. At the time, it led me to the label 'social constructivism' to reflect the approach I had adopted.

In my PhD I used social constructivism to describe my understanding and I explained it in this way:

I was particularly interested in the individual's meaning making; however, I also felt that the embedded nature of social, cultural, political institutions contributed to the individual's processes of meaning making. For me it was a matter of emphasis and 'social constructivism' captured my acknowledgement of the social, historical and cultural significance (and interaction) of meaning making, as well as my focus upon the individual's processes of sense making. For this research, a social constructivism perspective was not seen to deny the possibility of emancipation; however, emancipation was not a focal point of exploration. (Grandy, 2006, pp. 108/109)

There are historical and socio-cultural dimensions to constructionism (Schwandt, 2000, p. 197; Weinberg, 2014). Meaning making happens 'against a backdrop of shared understandings, practices and language, and so forth' (Schwandt, 2000, p. 197). Gubrium & Holstein (2008) suggest that 'constructionism' is more useful to describe a framework 'for appreciating, not critiquing, everyday reality-constructing practices in general' (p. 6). Yet, as Berger and Luckmann (1966) contend, the social distribution of knowledge varies, 'possessed differently by different individuals and types of individuals' (p. 60). I suggest then, whether explicit or not, that such meaning making efforts are often inseparable from power dynamics embedded in social relations, structures and systems (see also Haslanger, 2012, for a discussion of this).

Others refer to relational constructionism to describe how knowing is relational and dialogic (see Cunliffe, 2008; Fletcher, 2006; Hosking, 2011), whereby 'the importance of thinking about ways of being and relating to others' (Cunliffe, 2008, p. 132) is emphasized. Hosking (2011) contends that relational constructionism is a perspective with its own ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions (see also van der Haar & Hosking's (2004) conceptual piece on appreciative inquiry and relational constructionism).

These days I am less concerned about the specific label I use to describe my understanding of constructionism.³ I suggest that the labels reflect more a matter of emphasis, rather than fundamental differences. Regardless of the label used, it is more important that the researcher is transparent about key principles underpinning her conceptualization.

Constructionism as Ontology, Epistemology or Research Paradigm?

One of constructionism's concerns is the sociology of knowledge and thus is epistemological in nature (Berger

& Luckmann, 1966; Cunliffe, 2008; Gubrium & Holstein, 2008; Thorpe, 2008; Weinberg, 2014). Knowledge and learning are not 'out there' to be captured or discovered; rather, knowledge is socially embedded and constructed (Crotty, 2003; Schwandt, 2000; Thorpe, 2008). To 'know' is to be interested in understanding multiple 'truths', in contrast to searching for 'the truth where "the search for The Truth is both divisive and limiting"' (Wang, 2016, p. 572). To 'know' is to construct and negotiate meanings in relation to other people, structures, systems, cultures and histories, over time (Crotty, 2003). To 'know' is to appreciate experience and to understand context (Thorpe, 2008). 'Whereas rational approaches veer towards distance, clarity and generalizability, constructionist approaches favour closeness, complexity and locality' (Thorpe, 2008, p. 115). Typically, constructionist research is more concerned with the *what* or *how* of phenomena, rather than the *why* (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008).

Admitting that social, historical and cultural aspects have an influence on what we can know and learn is often seen as a lack of rigour and insight. Notwithstanding, constructionists have argued there is no escape from prejudice and that ignoring prejudice is itself a prejudice worthy of study in its own right. So rather than look for a perfect experience it is far better to accept it, warts and all. (Thorpe, 2008, p. 116)

Epistemologically, there are differences in the extent to which constructionists recognize subjective knowing alongside objective knowing. Subjective and objective knowing play out in a dialectical process, which reflects tensions and an inter-play between the meanings we construct through and from our lived experiences within systems of 'values, technologies, beliefs, lived histories and material conditions' (Thorpe, 2008, p. 116). For Schwandt (2000, p. 191), constructionism takes into account 'a desire to emphasize the contribution of human subjectivity (intention) to knowledge without sacrificing the objectivity of knowledge'. Crotty (2003) also takes the 'object' very seriously, arguing, 'meaning (or truth) cannot be described as simply "objective"'. By the same token, it cannot be described simply as "subjective"...we do not create meaning. We construct meaning. We have something to work with. What we have to work with is the world and the objects in the world' (pp. 43–4).

Berger & Luckmann's work (1966) on the *Social Construction of Reality* has been foundational in paving the way for our understanding of constructionism in business and management studies. For Berger and Luckmann, like many constructionists, meaning making is primarily an epistemological pursuit: 'the phenomenological analysis of everyday life or rather the subjective experience of everyday life refrains from any casual or generic hypothesis as well as assertions about the ontological status of the phenomena analysed' (Berger & Luckmann, 1966, p. 34). For some, there is a real scepticism of the 'real', and Schwandt (2000) contends that for Gergen, at least in his earlier work (1985, 1994, 1995), Potter (1996) and Denzin (1997), constructionism takes no position on ontology in that 'constructionism neither affirms nor denies the "world out there"' (p. 198). In more recent work, however, others such as Elder-Vass (2013) reconcile realism and social constructionism.

While for some constructionism may very well be primarily an epistemological endeavour, others focus upon its ontological considerations (see Cunliffe, 2011; and Shotter, 2010 for a discussion of ontology and constructionism). In my own research on stigma and work (e.g. dirty work) and how individuals construct

and make sense of their identities, I have felt compelled to recognize power and material effects (e.g. lack of job security, low pay, abuse) through which the everyday experiences of, for example, exotic dancers and other sex workers are often marked (e.g. Grandy, 2008; Grandy & Mavin, 2012, 2014; Mavin & Grandy, 2013). Similarly, in my work with Sharon Mavin on the experiences of women leaders and how they come to understand and construct meanings of their relations with other women, we have been motivated to better understand the lack of women's representation in senior leadership, the micro violence women leaders experience and the power dynamics that perpetuate these material effects (e.g. Mavin & Grandy, 2016a, 2016b; Mavin et al., 2014). In doing so, such a constructionism approach surfaces ontological assumptions aligned with realism. Further, I would argue that 'meaning making is an "ongoing accomplishment"' (Crotty, 2003, p. 47) and this implies a processual nature of 'reality' and a becoming ontology.

There are other constructionists who are also explicit about their ontological assumptions. For example, Hosking's (2011) conceptualization of relational constructionism accounts for the ontological and power dynamics inherent in constructionism, with the former tied to what I would consider both relational and processual notions of being. Also, in my work with Martyna Śliwa on contemplative leadership we illustrate how social constructionism with a relational ontology can unfold in empirical qualitative research (see Grandy & Śliwa, 2015).

Working through the dialectics of relativism, realism and processual dynamics of 'reality' can often be tricky for the novice qualitative researcher. I recall vividly from my PhD defence when the external examiner, whose own work was informed by constructionism, asked me about my ontological assumptions. Specifically, he was interested in how my understanding of constructionism aligned with my use of the term 'capture', a term used throughout my thesis. We talked through how 'capture' implies a static state whereby reality is out there for us to discover. A camera 'captures' a particular snapshot in time or truth, but my claims to meaning making as fluid, dynamic and re-negotiated contradicted that such static truths could be discovered. In sum, rather than view constructionism as an epistemological stance, following Lincoln and Guba (2000) I understand it as a research paradigm underpinned by particular ontological, epistemological, theoretical and methodological assumptions.

Intersubjectivity, Co-Construction and Reflexivity

Relational constructionism brings to the forefront interrelationships, the dialogical nature of relationships and the dialectics of self, self-in-relation to others and our surroundings (Cunliffe, 2011). Relational constructionism does not necessarily mean the research is intersubjective, but I contend that it is through such an interpretation of constructionism that the striking significance of intersubjectivity can play out for some. Social realities are always re-produced in human interaction (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Intersubjectivity appreciates how meaning is constructed in relation *to* others and in relation *with* others in the cultural, historical and political structures and systems in which we 'interact'. Cunliffe (2011, p. 658) notes, 'intersubjectivity does not just emphasize the "we" but also embedded and embodied interrelated experiences

and in situ meanings (Cunliffe, 2003, 2008), which shift as we move through conversations over time and people (durability and meanings}'. For me, intersubjectivity also considers the self as subjective in that the individual's lived, embodied and reflective experiences are integral to meaning making, which occurs in relation to and with others, thereby implying there will never be completely shared meanings.

My understanding (and articulation) of constructionism as it relates to intersubjectivity has evolved over time, partly in response to reviewers' requests to explain how 'relational' could be about more than 'interaction between' individuals. In a recent piece (Mavin & Grandy, 2016a) we propose a theory of abject appearance to explain women leaders' embodied identity work within a context of intra-gender relations. This theory was developed through an iterative process of data collection, analysis and theory stemming from interviews with 81 leaders, as well as reflective notes and conversations with the research assistants involved and between us as co-authors. Part-way through the journal-reviewing process, we were challenged by a reviewer to clarify what we meant by 'in relations with other women', 'women leaders' and 'social relations'. For us, the accounts of women leaders where they talked about their own experiences without making reference to an 'interaction' with another person (e.g. 'projects of the self', p. 8) informed our theorizing about women leaders, women leaders' relations with other women, and women's leadership. In revising our work, we came to a particular reading of intersubjectivity that allowed us to deliberate on the complexity of intersubjectivity and view the relational as that which entails the subjective self, self-in-relation to others, and self-in-relation to 'particular historical and social contexts' (Mavin et al., 2014, p. 444).

Following Cunliffe and Erikson (2011), we take a relational approach, placing emphasis on social constructions of organizing. We draw upon an intersubjective view of the world where meaning is shaped by one's experiences and is socially mediated (Anderson, 2008). It is 'a way of thinking about who leaders are in relation to others within the complexity of experience' (Cunliffe and Erikson, 2011: 1434). An intersubjective approach provides a bridge between the personal and the shared, the self and the Other to interpret meanings of social and cultural life. We understand women's intra-gender relations as a way of being in-relation-to other women. ...This means that even when talking of projects of the self this involves intersubjective recognition (Harding et al., 2013). For example, participants sometimes construct projects of the self and reflect on their own identities, as well as construct themselves in-relation-to other women, and in-relation-to men. In our analysis, we include diverse accounts to recognize the 'entwined nature of our relationships with others' (Cunliffe and Erikson, 2011: 1434): accounts of women leaders' in-relation-to men; accounts of self-in-relation-to women and to men; and accounts of, and reflections on, their own experiences offered for other women. (Mavin & Grandy, 2016a, p. 8)

The Researcher as Co-constructor

My understanding of constructionism is one where the researcher is also the researched, and where the subjectivity of the researcher is something to be embraced, not controlled for or eliminated. We 'are not detached from the social worlds' we 'seek to understand' (Weinberg, 2014, p. 19). In this way, 'intersubjectivity

in qualitative research is the co-constructed encounter between interviewer and interviewee during which each negotiates meaning and identity (Rapley, 2001), since “selves” are actualized in relational contexts (Pezalla, Pettigrew & Miller-Day, 2012)’ (Probst, 2016, p. 3).

We each bring to our research our opinions, values, stories and reflections and ‘all that I can really do – like any other social investigator – is to listen to what my “subjects” have to say and attempt to make a “reading” of their words in light of my own theoretical predispositions and concerns’ (Watson, 1998, p. 140). This is not to say that a qualitative researcher’s involvement in meaning making (in the co-construction of meaning) is something that should be taken for granted by qualitative researchers or that qualitative researchers have an open licence to do whatever they want without considering the implications for research design and rigour. Just the opposite, I contend that qualitative researchers adopting a constructionism approach have a responsibility to write themselves into the research in a way that is transparent, thorough and reflexive. In Corlett and Mavin’s chapter on reflexivity for this handbook, they also delve deeper into how such reflexivity plays out in qualitative research.

In some qualitative research, this notion of researcher as co-constructor manifests in ways where dialogics are more fully recognized and the relationship between ‘participant’ and researcher becomes an opportunity for participant-reflexivity. ‘Reflexivity is driven in conversation’ (Holton & Grandy, 2016, p. 375) and the ‘interaction’ between researcher and participant (through observation, interviews, ethnography, videos) is a relational setting where participants can take ‘time out’ from the mundane of their everyday working lives, retrospectively make sense of experiences, self-reflect and possibly unsettle engrained ways of thinking and doing (Holton & Grandy, 2016; McCann et al., 2008). Corlett (2013) offers the notion ‘participant-focused reflexivity’ to explain the process through which a participant, in interaction with someone or something, experiences an arresting, sticky (Riach, 2009) or striking (Cunliffe, 2002) moment. In a research context, the interview itself or any research ‘encounter’ can serve to trigger a questioning of a participant’s thoughts and actions, and everyday workplace experiences. It can lead to new insights for participants and ways of thinking, being and doing (Corlett, 2013; Cunliffe, 2002; Hibbert et al., 2010; Holton & Grandy, 2016).

In her qualitative study with public sector professionals, Corlett (2013) suggests that management learning is a reflexive and dialogic practice. She suggests that through researcher–participant engagement, the research process can serve as a dialogic process of learning. She adopts a relational social constructionist approach where the researcher is recognized as co-constructor in meaning making. Through interviews with the researcher, there is a ‘telling, re-telling and recalling of experiences’ and ‘participants are struck and engage in critical self-reflexivity’ (Corlett, 2013, p. 454). Corlett (2013) proposes six phases through which research as a dialogic practice might unfold (storying experience, making meaning, creating order, engagement in critical self-reflexivity, become aware of and change use of language, becoming otherwise). In Corlett’s study, the researcher as co-constructor is central to her understanding of constructionism, data analysis and theory development. Another example of the possibilities of participant-focused reflexivity and co-construction in qualitative research can be seen in my work with Judith Holton, where we explored the experiences of middle managers in healthcare to empirically develop the concept of voiced inner dialogue (VID). In that qualitative

study, we describe VID as a type of reflection-on-action and that participants' VID was triggered in dialogic conversation with the researchers (See Holton & Grandy, 2016).

An Illustrative Example. Theorizing Identity at Work: Exotic Dancing as a Site for Organizational and Occupational Research

Journal word restrictions mean that empirical qualitative research publications typically only scratch the surface regarding the philosophical assumptions of the research. It is therefore particularly difficult for the author to write about, or for the reader to see, the ontological, epistemological, theoretical and methodological assumptions that underpin constructionist qualitative research in business and management studies. To further elaborate on how viewing constructionism as a research paradigm might play out in ontological, epistemological, theoretical and methodological terms, in what follows I provide an illustrative example using my PhD work.

For my doctoral work I was interested in theorizing identity at work and looked to an 'extreme case' (Kreiner et al., 2009), namely exotic dancing as dirty work, because I expected the everyday experiences surrounding the complexity of identity construction to be particularly raw. I anticipated that such complexity would offer vivid and novel insights transferable to broader understandings of identity and work. My research question was, how does the subjective individual make sense of her work-based identity? I described my philosophical assumptions in this way:

As described by Burrell and Morgan (1979) and Denzin and Lincoln (2000), social constructivism adopts a relativist ontology through which local and specific, multiple, constructed realities emerge. At the same time, by acknowledging the specific historical, cultural and political contexts through which these realities are constructed I adopted a position that also takes into account the material effects produced by these specificities (e.g., stigma). Who we are is not just ideological, there are also material conditions which envelope our sense of selves (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000). In particular, my exploration into sex work / dirty work makes me sensitive to the experiences or outcomes (whatever form they might take) of such work for the participants involved in this study (e.g., job insecurity, withdrawal, violence). Social constructivism is seen to envelope relativism through multiple, negotiated meanings (Lincoln and Guba, 2000), realism through consideration of material effects (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000) and movement through ongoing processes of human thoughts, action and interaction. (Chia, 1996). (Grandy, 2006: 107/108)

Undoubtedly, qualitative researchers will also be interested in how ontological and epistemological considerations, as they relate to constructionism, play out in theoretical and methodological ways. Again, drawing from my PhD work, where I made these connections explicit, theoretically, for that work I fused several streams of literature, including emotion work/management, dirty work and identity. Transparency around how the ontological and epistemological assumptions of one's perspective of constructionism

interconnect with theoretical assumptions is important. Below, I offer an example to illustrate the interconnectedness of ontology, epistemology and theory in qualitative research in business and management.

This view of social constructivism also influenced my theoretical approach to this topic. In fusing emotion work and identity, dirty work and identity, and identity regulation as a form of organizational control, and social identity I created space for understanding how the subjective individual makes sense of their identity at work given various historical, social, cultural, and organizational resources that interact and intersect in these processes. So this was constructivism? For example, the conceptualization of identity employed in this research, that is, identity as processual, multiple, contradictory and coupled to our broader lived experiences, is aligned with the relativism, realism and fluidity described above in social constructivism. Moreover, my understanding of emotion as a lived, interactional experience within biological, cultural and social spheres accounts for the interplay between agency and structure similar to the underpinnings of social constructivism. In understanding agency as the struggles in which an individual engages, consciously or otherwise, in choosing to live a particular way (Brewis, 2004), I draw out the subjective individual in emotion work. Furthermore, in exploring exotic dancers' experiences through a dirty work lens and linking it to identity regulation as a form of organization control, I also illuminated the historical and institutional forces that play a role in the co-construction of identity at work for the participants with which I interacted. Overall, the subjective individual was given space to emerge while also considering the interplay with various social, historical and cultural resources in meaning making. (Grandy, 2006, p. 110)

What might such philosophical assumptions mean then for methodology and methods in qualitative research? Constructionism aligns well with a diverse range of methodologies and methods (see Charreire-Petit & Huault, 2008, for a discussion of the alignment between epistemology and methods as it relates to constructivist research on organizational knowledge). For my PhD research, I adopted what I referred to as the research 'strategies' of ethnography and case study and employed a range of what might be referred to as qualitative methods and 'data', including participant observation, diaries, semi-structured formal and informal interviews, and archival data. The excerpt below highlights how my constructionist assumptions of processual meaning making and meaning making for self in relation-to-others surface through my decision, and approach to, semi-structured interviews.

The intent was to explore if and how individuals engaged in identity work through talking about their work (Watson, 1998). Adopting Watson's (1998:141) view that we come to understand who we are to ourselves and others through interaction and engagement with others, as well as through 'on-going achievement of conversations which go on "in our minds"', I felt interviews conducted in a flexible, informal manner would be a suitable way through which to prompt and re-present how these individuals engage in a simultaneous process of talking and becoming. ...By this, I do not mean that I intended to 'produce' more objective accounts simply that this style of interviewing allowed more room to interpret how meanings were continually being re-constructed throughout the conversations

(Mason, 2002). A semi-structured interview guide was used to facilitate this process. (Grandy, 2006, pp. 119–20)

As noted earlier in the chapter, it is important that researchers acknowledge their role in the co-construction of meaning. As an example of the needed transparency around the inseparability between researcher and participants, in my PhD thesis I described my role as co-constructor of meaning. What follows is more a reflective, rather than reflexive, account of this.

As I tell this story, I am not presenting myself as a neutral party presenting ‘facts’ about work-based identity. As argued by Richardson (2000), I see myself as part of the research process, fully engaged in constructing, negotiating and struggling with the contradictions and tensions of trying to ‘hear’ the voices of individuals, while simultaneously co-creating the realities that I present. In effect, I am making sense of how others make sense of their identity construction, or as put by Thomas and Davies (2005:688), my ‘interpretations are ... a construction of the construction made by the actors studied. I am not concerned with locating the ‘truth’ about work-based identity. My concern is in understanding a set of truths that are co-created by those I meet throughout this research and myself. (Grandy, 2006, p. 6)

Through my conversations and engagement with participants I co-constructed and re-presented their identity at work stories as partial, retrospective accounts of their experiences, intertwined with my own lived experiences (e.g., gender, culture, age, education) (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002; Watson, 1998). (Grandy, 2006, p. 109)

My comfort (and at times discomfort) with the fluid and contradictory nature of my own work-based identity construction explains how I interpreted the stories of participants in the way I did. Their struggles and the multiple, contradictory nature of their identity work were particularly salient to me because of my own lived experiences. At the same time, the multiple methods employed in the research does, however, increase the trustworthiness of the discussions offered in the thesis and address criticisms of relativism. (Grandy, 2006, p. 110)

In later work published from the PhD thesis, I further developed my reflexivity, partly in response to reviewers who challenged my co-author and me to engage on a deeper level about our subjectivity and co-construction (see Mavin & Grandy, 2013; Mavin & Grandy, 2016a, 2016b).

Conclusion

The many ‘versions’ of constructionism make it impossible to write a chapter to serve as *the* definitive reference source on it. This chapter delineates *some* of the key considerations relevant for qualitative researchers, particularly those who might be new to constructionism in business and management and perhaps those who come to constructionism with limited experience with research philosophy.

Indeed, there are many other questions that may intrigue readers. For example, for those interested in unpacking differences in how constructionism can be used to answer macro versus micro level questions, the work of Burr (2015) and Cunliffe (2008) will be useful resources. Readers may want to refer to Berger & Luckmann (1966) or Gergen (2015) for a fuller discussion of language and constructionism conceptually, or Samra-Fredericks (2008) for an overview on language and discourse as it relates to constructionism in organizational studies. Other areas in which readers may have an interest relate to recent debates within organization studies on the convergence (or not) of constructionism and critical realism (e.g. Al-Amoudi & Willmott, 2011; Newton et al., 2011).⁴

In preparing to write this chapter, I reflected on the questions that I grappled with during and beyond my PhD research. It has been an interesting writing process to retrospectively reflect on and identify what I think were my most significant struggles more than 10 years ago when I was writing up my thesis. Some of the questions, conversations and reflections that surfaced throughout my writing contemplations were arresting and vibrant memories, while others emerged gradually as I progressed in my writing. This is *my* construction of constructionism for qualitative researchers in business and management, a version that I hope offers valuable insights to constructionist qualitative researchers.

Notes

1. I would like to thank Cathy Cassell and Ann Cunliffe for their helpful feedback on an earlier version of this chapter.
 2. Or perhaps, better put by Berger and Luckmann (1966), seemingly real or objectivized social realities, based on stable interactions.
 3. See also Harris and Graham (1994) for a discussion of three constructivist paradigms, namely endogenous, exogenous and dialectical.
 4. Much of the work on critical realism and constructionism is conceptual and not empirical.
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