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## Social constructivist theory social work

Over the past few years, in close discussions with others, we have tried to develop an approach to practice that we call constructive social work (Parton and O'Byrne, 2000). While the elements we discuss will be very familiar to the readers of this diary, we feel that the idea of constructive social work can offer something that is distinctive and challenging. The central purpose of this paper is twofold: first to outline what we mean by constructive social work and what we see as some of its central elements; and secondly to discuss the perspectives related to constructionism and which we see provides important theoretical frameworks for developing such an approach to practice. Before we do, however, we outline why we feel it is important to engage in such a task at the present time. Why do we need a constructive approach to social working practices now? Although we believe it is an exaggeration to say that social work in the English-speaking Western world is in crisis (Clarke, 1993), there can be little doubt that in recent years social work has been the subject of significant criticism and is currently undergoing major changes and reconfiguration (Parton, 1996; Parton, 1998a) which is likely to continue well into the new millennium. In particular, it seems that athletes are subject to a number of increasingly detailed procedures, goals, performance measures and managerial oversights that have the effect of undermining both their professional skills and morale. As one of us has argued elsewhere: Increasingly, it feels as if social work does not have a core theoretical knowledge base, and that there is a hole in the middle of business (Parton, 1994, p.30). There has been a failure to articulate and develop concepts and theories for practice in recent years that have done a significant disservice, not only to practitioners, but more importantly, the people they work with. In particular, we have not built on a number of insights and concepts that had previously been derived from detailed analysis of what is going on between social worker and service user. Our central goal of trying to develop constructive social work is to help both practitioners and those in the social work academy to (re) appreciate the importance of developing detailed and critical analysis of meaningful language and narrative between social worker and service user and to offer social workers ways to use narrative to construct change. The importance of such a task has recently been underlined by Olive Stevenson in her reflections on fifty years of child protection practices in England and Wales since the Children Act 1948, and in particular what she claims as marginalizing and general undermining psychodynamic theory that had led to a major problem, and which has dogged both training and practice since - 'failure to develop an indigenous coherent practice theory for social work' (Stevenson, 1998a, p.156 our weight). More special, and of relevance to our purposes here, she argues that it is not an exaggeration to see in the 1960s the beginning of a decline in the search for meaning that dogs us today, when extensive reviews can be devoid of theoretical substance (Stevenson, 1998b, p.84 original weight). While there has since been a proliferation of theories available (see, for example, Howe, 1987; In 1997 he was released. Adams, Dominelli and Payne, 1998), according to Stevenson the problem 'remains the same as in the 1960s and 1970s: how to enable social workers to choose, seek and integrate theory so that they address their work in child welfare more targeted' (Stevenson, 1998b, p.93). The failure to develop theory of practice in recent years that she points out is somehow symbolic of the situation social work finds itself in. It is as if social workers are deployed to treat needs in a largely bureaucratic way and put human misery into categories of risk and vulnerability. As David Howe has argued (1992; 1996) social work has been legalized and procedural where manuals, guidelines and lines of accountability are carried out in a functional way almost to the exclusion of creativity or skill in dealing with human relationships. However, we would suggest that these inability to develop useful and relevant theories for practice are as much a consequence as they are a cause of the changing nature of social work. The last few years have witnessed something of a re-emergence of interest in trying to build on the previous psychodynamic and ego psychological approaches in terms of the development of psychosocial relationship-based theories and an understanding of attachments for social work (Howe, 1995; Howe, 1997; Howe, 1998; Howe and Hinings, 1995; Howe, Brandon, Hinings and Schofield, 1999). That's not our purpose here, but for in many ways Stevenson is over dismissive of certain developments especially in the 1970s and early 1980s in the form of various writers attempting to move beyond the psychodynamic approach. She is over critical to the impact of the more critical theoretical influences in the period. Far from being negative and hostile to social work, we can see the impact of ideas related to interactionism, labelling and deviance theory, especially the work of Erving Goffman (1968a; 1968b; 1971), Howard Becker (1963; 1964) and Ronald Laing (1965; 1970; 1971) ? as well as new Marxism of the radical social labor movement (Bailey and Brake, 1975) ? as to help practitioners see that not only were their interventions influenced by a number of social and political factors, but that social work interventions were not necessarily for the sake of the client. Similarly, the 1980s and 1990s have seen a growing awareness of the importance of sexuality, gender, race, disability and age, as well as social class as important factors for increasing exclusion, oppression and discrimination, and that social workers can play a key role in the development and strengthen practice (see Thompson 1997 and 1998 for a discussion on these issues). There was also evidence of the 1970s and 1980s of others who wrote about what was happening at the interpersonal, detailed exchange level between client and employee, and in the process moved beyond the problems associated with adopting the traditional casework model based on the psychodynamic approach. They stressed the importance of trying to understand how people understand their daily experiences and how this affects how they act and feel towards other people. It was the development of an explicit client-centered approach that tried to articulate the articulate articulate in social work (Jordan, 1970, 1972, 1979; Brandon and Jordan, 1979; 1981; Wilkes, 1981. England, 1986) and that emphasized the use of self, the nature and quality of the relationship, the understanding of experience, the search for meaning, the importance of communication and the transactional nature of the relationship between the social worker and the client, and that an understanding of and use of language was central. The content of this writing was such that neat and clear theoretical models were not developed. However, it was on this terrain that the potential for developing theory for practice could have been developed, and in many ways it is from this tradition that we can see the clearest connections and roots of what we are trying to develop here. Unfortunately since the mid-1980s, such a tradition has been all but lost from literature. At the heart of such an approach was the attempt to help the service user recognize and understand themselves and change both opinion and the perception of experiences. To do this, however, the employee required to engage in detailed awareness and use of the social work process and sensitive recognition of the nature, limitations and potential of his own role and authority. Crucially, it saw social work as both more than the application of either science or engineering, and that the skills required were qualitatively different than those that needed to be an organizational official. Constructive social work What do we understand therefore by constructive social work? We have chosen the term for two reasons. First, we draw on what has been called constructionist and narrative approaches to both analyze and understand social work and more specifically to develop our theoretical insights for practice. In many ways, this can be seen as our great task. Secondly, however, we have chosen the concept constructively to reflect our desire to try to provide a perspective that is explicitly positive and tries to build on what we see as both peculiar to social work and which are its great strengths - but which is at risk of being lost in the current climate. While we use the term metaphorically we do not want to lose its literal meaning for the core idea of construction, from Latin to day, it is to build or to put together. The Oxford Dictionary defines construction as the action or way of constructing while constructive is defined as having a useful purpose, 'Hilfpluf'. These are ideas that we want to articulate and capture. The concept constructively used here is thus both theoretical and metaphorical - both are important. We are also clear that although social work is an increasingly complex activity that has a number of fidelity and accounts, for us here the main focus is to work with the service user, and there is failure, in recent years, to address how we can understand face-to-face meetings of the work that has been lacking, and which we see as in urgent need of attention. While we feel the approach we are developing here has broad potential for the way athletes think about their work? for example, in the agency, with other agencies, organizations and professionals, work with communities and the broader community ? there is work with individuals and their immediate relationships that we concentrate on in this book. We do it for two reasons. Firstly, because there is work with individuals and their immediate environment that, certainly in the UK, continues to be the focus of most social work; and secondly, because we feel that this is an area that in recent years has received little attention. What is it that clients and users find most useful and useful in their contact with social workers? There are now many studies available that have tried to identify what those on the receiving end of social work and the human services more generally have found most useful and useful. David Howe (1993) has undergone a wide cross-section of studies covering a six-decade period that includes more traditional evaluations, studies that asked consumers about their experiences, and the work of those who have written personally about their experiences. A similar task is performed by Seligman (1995) in the United States. The central message that comes over time and time again is that it is not the special model or techniques used by the social worker or adviser that are significant, but the quality and value of the experience. The main themes that users identify for success are summed up by Howe who accept me, understand me and talk to me. This is not just to say that good social work is about establishing a relationship, important about this is, but that the way we understand and come to terms with difficult and painful experiences is through talk. Talk and language are the key to making sense and taking control. It makes sense that is important, no matter how it looks and where it comes from. A client who wants to reshape himself and understand what is happening must immerse himself in talk, for it is through language that the individual himself is formed. As Howe demonstrates, there are less specific procedures and techniques and more to engage in an active conversation about themselves that leads to understanding and change. Users clearly say that what they value is the experience of speaking that helps them understand their experience and that gives them the opportunity to better control and cope with life and try to change it accordingly. Howe concludes his study by arguing: If one distills and distills the messages contained in the accounts provided by clients of their experiences of counseling and therapy - the need for acceptance and consideration, and the search for understanding and meaning - it may be possible to argue that one is left with a very condensed, but no less quintessential observation : Clients seek to control the importance of their own experience and the meanings that others give to this experience. Control helps customers cope, and it strengthens. It increases self-esteem and personal self-esteem, and ultimately it encourages people to believe that they are valued and worthy people' (Howe, 1993, p.195 original weight). Similarly, studies of successful family therapy show that it is the strength of the therapeutic alliance with someone whom recipients perceive as warm, reliable, non-judgmental and empathetic that is key. It seems that telling one's story in its own terms and having it heard respectfully is a very necessary ingredient for change to start happening. It may be that the greatest contribution of the psychodynamic approach had little to do with providing an understanding of the functioning of the ego, over-egotid and id, but the importance of validation that a person receives only in telling their story to an attentive listener. The idea of careful listening is a relatively new theme in family therapy and counseling (Anderson, 1987; Hoffman, 1993), but traditionally has been seen as central to the social work process for it has been recognized that listening creates a space for thinking and reflection (Rees and Wallace, 1982; Fisher, 1983). For example, the traditional principles of social work espoused by Biestek (1961) include good individualized listening, as well as: accessibility; non-judgmental and non-directive; and work on the basis of trust and confidentiality. Although these questions have always been central to the approaches developed by the authors who have tried to develop the client-centered approaches, an explicit recognition of the importance of language and narrative has not been developed. But ironically back in 1968, Noel Timms (1968) argued that it was essential that social work recognizes the centrality of language to its practice. He wrote that it is surprising that social workers, who rely largely on language, should have given so little attention to words and what it means to speak a language (Timms, 1968, p.1), especially at the time the activity was often characterized as an attempt to cure through talk, and their case papers summarized or verbatim form accounts of countless conversations with their customers. He felt there was a great incongruity that needed to be addressed - social work lacking systematic critical attention to language when words play such a decisive role in both social work education and practice. He went beyond identifying this incongruity, however, and placed language in a theoretical framework that in many ways can be seen to pre-figure versions of constructionism that would emerge a few years later. He argued that language plays a critical role in the constitution of our social life, not just in the description. This was about whether we are concerned about public relations, with those of a more intimate nature, or, with what he described, as the human [sic] relationship with himself [sic]' (p.4). He saw language as the key to the establishment and maintenance of human relationships. For 'language is the medium in which man [sic] becomes conscious of his [sic] inner self, and at the same time it is the key to the understanding of his [sic] external relationships. It unites him [sic] with, but also separates him [sic] from, others' (p.4). Unfortunately, the problem and challenge that Timms identified has rarely been addressed since. It seems that we have become so keen to assess, manage, plan, monitor and account that we have lost the core of what social workers and social work have to offer in terms of the narrative and interaction processes involved. We need a way to bring language, listen and speak back in, but in a way that is theoretically informed and usable, so that we recognize it for what it is - central to social work. As we will demonstrate, understanding as a collaborative process is a core idea of constructionism. Here, opinion and understanding are questions about negotiations between the participants in the conversation and thus the understanding and use of the language seen as central to the aid process. However, what do we understand about construction workers for the purpose of informing theory of practice? In this vision, a policy and service framework that is indebted to market theory replaces the monopoly on welfare services by welfare agencies. Beveridge is replaced by what Harris (1990) calls elections in welfare. Some key themes of constructionism While construction workers perspectives have only recently begun to enter social work in any explicit sense (Rodwell, 1990, 1998; 1991; Wilkin, 1991). In 1993, Hants was named dean, 1993; Rodwell and Wood, 1994; In 1995, he was replaced by The 1995. Jokinen et al, 1999), it is important to recognize that they have become increasingly prevalent in various areas of Western intellectual life over several years. They have been central to some of the most important developments and heated debates in literary studies, philosophy, history, socio-legal studies, anthropology, sociology and psychology. However, it would be wrong to assume that there is a single attitude or position can exemplify the work of those that it would be reasonable to include under the umbrella term constructionism. But while Mike Lynch is critical of attempts to argue that there is something deeper and more coherent for the various writers and approaches who are happy to use the term, he argues that nothing can be more definitive about constructionism than the thesis that social identities depend on audience descriptions (1998, p.14). This is perhaps well illustrated by telling a story related by Sarbin and Kitsuse (1994, p.2) about three baseball referees who reflect on their professional practice of calling balls and strikes. The first, says one confident realist: I call them the way they are, like the second, who leans toward phenomenal analysis, says: I call them as I see them, and the third closes the discussion with They Are Nothing Until I call them and thus refer to her/his construction worker sympathies. The contrast between the realist umpire and the social constructionist umpire illustrates Lynch's point that the audience, or as in this case the umpire, ascription is the key to social identity. Similar stories can be told about all games, for example in football is an ugly always a foul or does it depend on whether the referee calls something a foul? Constructionist judges or judges will argue that it does not exist until they call it, and in calling it, assign meaning to it. While such stories may seem inappropriately playful, they illustrate what is distinctive about construction workers. A little closer to our concerns constructionist perspectives have become increasingly common in the sociological study of social problems in the United States and is especially associated with the work of Spector and Kitsuse (1987) which itself has led to significant theoretical debate (Holstein and Miller, 1993; Miller and Holstein, 1993). However, such an approach has a much longer legacy (see Waller, 1936) and in 1941, Fuller and Myers argued that: A social problem is a condition defined by a significant number of people as a departure from any social norm that they value. Each societal problem thus consists of an objective state and a subjective definition. The objective state is a verifiable situation that can be controlled about the existence and size (proportions) of impartial and trained observers. The subjective definition is the awareness of some individuals that the condition is a threat to certain valued values' (Fuller and Myers, 1941, p.320, original weight). But while Fuller and Myers suggested that objective relationships are not sufficient alone to take into account why something should become a social problem, they stopped short of claiming that objective conditions are neither necessary nor adequate. But as Blumer (1971) and Spector and Kitsuse (1973) later claimed it is the claim that a problem exists that is key. The focus of analyzing the emergence and of problems such as social problems thus, the way that claim-makers construct certain areas of social life becomes problematic. Such an approach informed a study that one of us carried out in the early 1980s into the problem of child abuse (Parton, 1985). There are also studies that analyze the way athletes ? whether these are police, doctors or the one who - actively construct aspects of everyday life as problems in the micro-sense by making social problems work (see, for example, Miller, 1992; Holstein and Miller, 1997). There are now a number of research studies that explicitly use construction workers methods to analyze and try to make transparent what happens in social work meetings with clients and in social work practice more generally (see Hall, 1997; Jokinen et al, 1999; Karvinen et al, 1999; Parton, Thorpe and Wattam, 1997; Pithouse, for example, in 1998). The central message of this research tends to be that, far from being neutral, rational and scientific, social working practices are not only variable, but are inherently moral and manipulative and always not for the sake of service users. The emphasis in such research tends to be to deconstruct the practice and thus show that it is not nearly as benign as it can be assumed. The practical contributions of such research to develop constructive practices are thus rarely made clear. Perhaps the most important event in introducing the concept of social construction to a much broader academic audience was the publication in 1967 of Berger and Luckman's The Social Construction of Reality, and while a number of commentators have argued that they developed a particular version of social construction, the choice of social construction work in the title was to prove a useful hook for successive writers to hang their own ideas on. Berger and Luckman took issue with images of society that were dominant in social theory in the postwar era, and which they saw as excessively rationalistic and functional, leaving little room for individual freedom and agency. They were concerned that something had gone terribly wrong with the enlightenment project so that most social theorists at one random set had become antihumanistic and were overly concerned with the impersonal laws of social order rather than how order was the result of human action, choice and creativity. They set down two tasks. First to specify the main premises and concepts that clarify nature in everyday life. Drawing from the phenomenal philosophy of Edmund Husserl (1975) and Alfred Schutz (1962-6), they introduced a series of concepts such as conscious awareness, more realities, practical attitude, intersubjectivity and so on, to frame everyday life as a fluid, several, precariously negotiated achievement in interaction. Their second and perhaps the main goal was to offer a general theory of social origin and maintenance of social institutions. Their main task was that in collusion create social worlds through their linguistic, symbolic activity for the purpose of providing context and purpose to a largely open, unformed human existence. Society is neither a system, a mechanism nor an organism; it is a symbolic construction consisting of ideas, meanings and languages that constantly change through human action and impose limitations and opportunities on human actors themselves. What such an approach does is emphasize the processes in which people define themselves (their identities) and their environments. People do it by participating in their social worlds, interacting with others and giving meaning to aspects of their experience. Constructing social realities is seen as an ongoing aspect of people's everyday lives and relationships. In recent years, such approaches have increasingly recognized the rhetorical aspects of construction, in that it is partly a process to convince themselves and others that a rendering of social reality is more legitimate or credible than any other. While construction workers made a relatively late entry into psychology, there are now many examples where such thinking makes a direct impact. Michael Billig (1987) and more recently John Shotter (1993) have, for example, analyzed thinking as a rhetorical process in which conversation and language are key to understanding identity. Thinking is not seen as a private or personal activity, it is a micropolitical and interaction process that is concerned with and categorizing everyday life and developing arguments that justify preferred realities and course of action. Likewise, Potter and Wetherall (1987) argue that language

orders our perceptions and makes things happen. They suggest that, what they call, social texts, not only reflect or mirror objects, events and categories found in the social and natural world, they actively construct a version of these things. They don't just describe things, they do things and thus have social and political implications. Thus, this linked back to our previous analysis, social problems and personal problems are versions of events or situations that people use to justify some course of action and to undermine others. Constructions thus have real implications for all concerned both practically and politically. John Shotter's work in social psychology is of particular interest, especially when he argues that our talk (and our writing) about talk begins to take a dialogue or a conversation swing (Shotter, 1993, p.1). His basic premise is that it is within the dynamically enduring context of actively constructed relationships that what is being talked about gets its meaning. Therefore, instead of focusing on how individuals get to know the objects and entities in the world around them, we should be more interested in how people first develop and maintain ways to relate to each other in their speech, and then, from within these ways of speaking, do of their surroundings. He calls his approach a rhetorically-responsive version of social construction because the narrative of the language he offers is a communication, conversational or dialogical account in which people's responsive understanding of each other is primary. Part of what we need to learn growing up, if we want to be perceived as talking (and writing) authoritatively about so-called factual matters, is how to respond to the others around us if they challenge our demands. This includes conversations with ourselves. We need to speak to an awareness of the possibility of such challenges, and be able to respond to them by justifying our demands. This is a rhetorical rather than a reference or representational form of language because instead of simply claiming to portray or reflect a state or an external reality, speech and language can have the effect of moving people into action and changing their views and beliefs. Language can be seen as not only constituting reality, but actively change it. Shotter calls the approach rhetorical because rhetoric makes use of metaphors that might otherwise seem incoherent. Rhetoric understandably gives linguistic form to otherwise only sensed feelings or tendencies shared between speakers (and writers) and their audience. This version of constructionism argues that we need to understand language as a communication, conversation or dialogue process in which people's responsive understanding of each other is primary. What matters is not so much the conclusions came to as the terms in which arguments are conducted. To talk in new ways is to construct new forms of social relationships and to construct new forms of social relationships is to construct new ways of being for ourselves. The Post Modern Turn More recent interest in constructionism has been further stimulated by the rise in both North America and the UK by a variety of perspectives that have been worded (post)modern and which in turn have only begun to enter the social work domain in recent years (Aldridge, 1996; 1996; Dominelli, 1996(1996) Featherstone and Fawcett, 1995; In 1993, he was replaced by The 1993. Healy, 1999; Howe, 1994; In 1994 he was released in 1997, 1997. In 1998, he was replaced by The New 1998. In 1991, McBeath and Webb Meinert, Pardeck and Murphy, 1998; Pardeck, Murphy and Chung, 1994; Parton, 1994a, 1994b; In 1995 he was released in 1995. In 1994 he was 1000-2013. Rojek, Peacock and Collins, 1988; Sands and Nuccio, 1992). While it is not our intention to discuss how we view the developments and debates related to constructions related to, conceptually and theoretically to postmodernism, it is important to note that there are a number of similar topics. This is not surprising when we realize that many theorists are bracketed under both headlines and a number of writers seem to use the terms almost interchangeably. For us, however, we see social constructionism as concerned with a more special methodical attitude, while (post) modernity much more fundamental in its implications ? theoretical, political and practical. However, concerns about (post) modernity have provided a fertile context in which an interest in constructionism can flourish. Similarly, construction workers' perspectives themselves can be seen to make a significant contribution to underlining the concerns that debates about (post) modernity themselves draw attention to. The term postmodernism was first used in the 1930s, but became increasingly common in literature, architecture, philosophy and art more generally from the 1960s onwards (Turner, 1990; Featherstone, 1988) and became particularly prominent with the publication of Jean-Francois Lyotard's The Postmodern Condition in 1984. While perhaps (post) modern perspectives are united by a number of cultural projects proclaiming a commitment to heterogeneity, fragmentation and difference, it is perhaps their criticism of modernity that has proved most influential and contentious. Modernity as a summary term is seen to refer to the cluster of social, economic and political systems that appeared in the West with enlightenment in the late 18th century. Unlike the premodern, modernity assumed that human order is neither natural nor God-given, but is vulnerable and conditional. But with the development and application of science, nature may be subject to human control. The peculiarity of modernity is seen as: the understanding of history as having a specific and progressive direction; the attempt to develop universal categories of experience; the idea that reason can provide the basis for all activities; and that the nation-state could coordinate and promote such development for the whole society. The guiding principle of modernity is the quest to establish reliable foundations of knowledge. It aims to identify the central truths about the world, but also assumes that the truth does not lie on the surface of things, but is hidden by appearance. The two crucial elements of modernity in the post-Enlightenment period were thus seen as the progressive union of scientific objectivity and political-economic rationality (our emphasis, Parton, 1994a). In the modern framework, the goal is to produce knowledge of a chosen aspect of the physical or social world in which we may require greater security. At that point we can give a sense of truth about this knowledge, and also give to people who produce knowledge (such as scientists or professionals) status as the holder of truth and expert about that aspect of the world. In short, the modernist equation is: external reality - objective knowledge - certainty of this knowledge - claiming truth - expert status given to the holder of truth/knowledge. Modernist truth is actually bound to security, external reality and objective knowledge. And modernism relies both on (and produces) a clear splitting of the subject that wants to know, and the object being observed knowledge and truth' (Flaskas, 1997, p.5, original weight). Increasingly, however, there is an acknowledgement that we now live in a world that has become disoriented, disturbed and subject to doubt. The pursuit of order and control, the promotion of calculability, belief in progress, science and rationality and other functions that were so inherent to modernity are undermined by a simultaneous range of disturbing conditions and experiences. In part, this is related to the major social, economic and cultural transformations that have characterized recent times in terms of globalization, the increasing importance of the media and the growing networks of information technology that transform and transmit knowledge, changes in forms of consumption and production and increased awareness of risk and uncertainty. More fundamentally, however, it is related to changing notions of ontology (who we are and our sense of being) and epistemology (how we know what we know). It is argued that modernism's promise to deliver order, security and certainty has been unfulfilled, and increasingly it feels that there are no transcendental and universal criteria for truth (science), judgment (ethics) and taste (aesthetics). The overarching belief in reason and rationality disappears as there is a breakdown of consensus related to some major narratives (overarching theories or explanations) and their articulation of progress, liberation and perfection and what constitutes the centers of authority and truth. The rejection of the idea that a theory or belief system can ever reveal the truth, and the emphasis on the diversity of truth and the will to truth, captures some of the essential elements associated with postmodernity. While modern times have been called different late modern, post-industrial, and (post) traditional as well as (post)modern, there is broad agreement on the most important elements of social transformation under discussion in terms of: the increasing pace of change; the increasing importance of difference, diversity and the growth of various new political movements and strategies; and pervasive awareness of relativities; the opening of individual choices and freedom and, which will become central to our purposes, the growing awareness of the socially constructed nature of reality. Following Smart (post)modern means living without guarantee, without security and order and with readiness and ambivalence. To put it another way, it means living without illusions and with uncertainty' (Smart, 1999, p.16). (Post) modernity is thus characterized by fragmentation of modernity in forms of institutional pluralism, characterized by increasing awareness of difference, readiness, relativism and ambivalence - all modernity sought (and claimed) and have overcome. It is this constant and growing questioning of modern approaches and modern resolutions that have been diagnosed as symptomatic of (post) modern condition 1994a(1994a) and it is the perception of (post) modernity as the state of modernity comes to its senses, freed from false consciousness that is seen as the key (Bauman, 1992). The truth thus now takes the guise of truth and is centered neither in the word of God (as in the premodern) nor human reason (as in the modern), but is decentralized and localized so that many truths are possible, depending on different times and different places. In many ways, it becomes modern, because of its dependence on supposedly universal categories and neutral rationality, not seen as necessarily humanitarian, progressive or liberating that was often assumed, but can be exploitative and oppressive because of its lack of recognizable difference. It is a failure to recognize the nature, consequences and implications of relying on totalizing belief systems where these are capitalist, socialist, patriarchal, ablist, colonial or whatever. The views, experiences and interests of white, middle-class, skilled men have always been embedded in ideas, theories and approaches, but presented as if they were universal, objective and neutral. In (post)modern, there is thus a significant destabilization of a core pre-assumption of modernism - that the way something is represented reflects the underlying reality. For if nothing is inherently or immutable true nothing is inherently or immutable real. In a world where everything is increasingly mediated and forwarded via complex representation systems, the symbols used have a life of their own and take on their meaning, not on the basis of what reality they are meant to represent, but the context in which they are used. It is in this sense that Baudrillard (1990) argues that the differences between concepts and objects, representations and reality, and theory and practice no longer hold - if they ever did. Perhaps most importantly 'the way things are said is more important than possession of truths' (Rorty, 1979, p.359). An understanding of language is thus central to approaches that are sympathetic to (post)modern. This is the thesis, originally promoted by Wittgenstein (1963) and developed by Lyotard (1984), that knowledge can only be derived from language games. Instead of just being a tool that points to objects, the language conveys everything that is known. Far from having a separate existence, reality is embedded in interpretation, so truth is a product of language, not reality. We can not exceed interrogation and assume that reality is just waiting to be discovered; it comes out of the linguistic actions of people. An understanding of the part that language plays in the formation of human self, human thought and human subjectivity thus underpins (post) modern perspectives. Questions of knowledge, difference, power and subjectivity have also been central to feminism and other theoretical and political movements that have in recent years attempted to voice and excluded parts of society. Feminists, for example, have disputed what counts as knowledge and truth and have demonstrated how language constructs sexism and has devised notions of power that find it in everyday life and the local. The importance of difference has been further recognized via the recognition of the range of experiences among women, especially as a result of their ethnicity and social class (Butler and Scott, 1992; In 1996, he was replaced by The 1996. In 1996, he became a dejected. Theoretical development in different areas has thus helped to emphasize some of the central themes of (post)modernism. But because there are probably as many forms of (post) modernism as there are (post) modernists there are many divergent and even conflicting possibilities that open up. Within this diversity, when it comes to social science, Rosenu (1992) has delineated two broad orientations that we feel are useful for taking our thinking forward: the skeptical postmodernists and the affirmative postmodernists. She argues that skeptical postmodernists offer a distrustful, pessimistic, negative, gloomy assessment of modern times characterized by fragmentation, disintegration, meaninglessness, absence of moral parameters and social chaos. She calls this the dark side of postmodernism, the postmodernism of despair that speaks of the demise of the subject, the end of the author, the impossibility of truth and the abrogation of the order of representation. It is concerned about the destructive nature of modernity and points to unprecedented uncertainty in which everything alienates, hopelessly and ambiguously, and where no social, political or practical projects are worthy of commitment. If, as the skeptics claim, there is no truth then all we are left with is parody and play - puns and meaning. While the affirmative postmodernists agree with skeptics' critique of modernity, especially when it comes to science and rationality, they have a more hopeful, optimistic view of the possibilities of the postmodern age and are positively oriented towards the importance of the process. They are much more open to the potential for practical actions and are not only concerned with deconstruction, but with reconstruction. While seeking a tentative approach to practice, there is a central recognition that normative choices and trying to build practical and political coalitions and cooperation lie at the heart of everyday life. By recognizing that can only be understood in context(s) it recognizes the importance of interdependence and the social and political cultures we live in. It is not the death of the subject that is of the greatest interest so much as the recognition of the diverse nature of subjectivity that is the focus. After Bauman (1992; 1993) there is an acknowledgement that by opening up individuals to the possibilities of choice and responsibility they are really made up as moral. Instead of seeing the disappearance of the subject is claimed there has been an extension in the constructiveness of identities from ascriptive and natural (in the premodern) to socially acquired and quasi-natural (in modern), to chosen and socially negotiated (in postmodern) (Hollis, 1995). Because of the intimate relationship between language and reality, people are seen as placed in positions where they can create their own destiny. They are given agency, for through the exercise of will individuals are able to invent reality. It is not so much that people have to struggle to find meaning within a melange of meaningless, but they are placed at the center of reality. Instead of understanding out of events, people invent options and make them real. Individuals are considered to have opportunities for positive freedoms and positive choices and the ability to re-moralize and reinvent their personal and social worlds. While it is clearly difficult to accommodate skeptical postmodernism with social work, perspectives offered by affirmative postmodernism are much more thought-provoking in helping us think about and open up constructive approaches to practice - especially the emphasis on truth re-definition. It is interpretive and prioritizes susceptibility, dialogue, listens to and talks to the other. It reveals paradox, myth and history, and persuades of questions, hints, metaphors and invitations to the possible rather than by relying on science and trying to approach the truth. Conclusions So what are some of the main themes of constructionism that we want to build on? Viv Burr (1995) has helpfully summarized what she identifies as the main characteristics of social constructionist approaches. They give us a useful preliminary statement and help us gather some of the ideas we have discussed in this article. First, construction workers insist that we develop a critical attitude towards our taken for granted ways of understanding the world, including ourselves. It suggests that we should be critical of the idea that our observations of the world unproblematic reveal their nature to us in any simple way. It issues the obvious, the real and, crucially, the taken-for-granted. It challenges the view that conventional knowledge is based on objective observation and that we can therefore easily distinguish and object, perceived and the real. It is therefore highly suspicious of what is called positivism and empiricism in traditional science - the assumption that the nature of the world can be revealed only by observation and that what exists is what we perceive to exist. Constructionism warns us to be ever suspicious of our assumptions about what the world looks like and the categories we use to share and interpret it. Secondly, such categories and concepts are seen as historically and culturally specific and therefore vary over time and place. Special forms of knowledge are not only the products of their history and culture are therefore objects of it, but there are thus many forms of knowledge available. We cannot assume that our ways of understanding are necessarily the same as those of others and are closer to the truth. Third, knowledge of the world is developed between people in their daily interactions so that we should be centrally concerned with the social processes in which this comes and can be changed. These negotiated understandings can take a variety of different forms that thus invite different types of actions. But while the world's structures maintain some patterns of action, they exclude others as well. Thus, instead of being able to distinguish knowledge and action they are closely related. Fourth, because the social world, including ourselves as humans, is a product of social processes, it follows that there can be no given, determined nature to the world out there. There are no essences inside things or people who are hidden and that make them what they are. Constructionism is not just to say that one's culture has an impact on our nature or even that our nature is a product of the environment or social context. It's not just a matter of nature or industry that both see the person as having some definable and visible essence - this is not compatible with construction workers. Ian Hacking (1999) has recently argued that although there are different approaches to and forms of social construction, there are some central underlying assumptions that are held to. Social construction workers, when considering x ? which can be a problem, a category, a problem or what? believe that: (1) in the current state, x is taken for granted, so that x seems inevitable; but that (2) x do not need to have existed or do not have to be as it is, it is not determined by the nature of things and is thus not inevitable; and further (3) that x is quite bad as it is, and therefore (4) we would be much better if x was done away with or at least radically changed. While it does not inevitably follow that if you stick with (1) and (2) that (3) and (4) should follow, it is our view that problematization and criticism with a view to change and transformation are central to the approach we take here and are important elements of social work. The four underlying assumptions about social construction outlined by Hacking very much inform our approach to constructive social work. \* This article is an adaptation of Chapter 1 of our book Constructive Social Work: Against a New Practice?, published by Macmillan and St Martin's Press in August 2000. REFERENCES Adams R, Dominelli L and Payne M (eds) (1998) Social work: Topics, issues and critical debates. London, Macmillan. Aldridge M (1996) 'Gone to market: Being a profession in the postmodern world', British Journal of Social Work, 26(2) 177-194. Anderson T (1987) 'Reflective team: dialogue and meta-dialogue in clinical work', Family Process, 26, 415-428. Atherton C R (1993) 'Empiricists Social Constructionists: Time for a Case Fire', in Families in the Community: Journal on Contemporary Human Services, December 617-624. Bailey R and Brake M (eds) (1975) Radical social work. London, Edward Arnold. Baudrillard J (1990) Fatal Strategies. London, Semiotext/P Pluto. 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