

Working in the (social) construction zone

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Imagine a scientist sitting at home, looking through old family photos of her extended family – parents, siblings, aunts and uncles, cousins, grandparents, great grandparents. Suddenly she thinks she sees a pattern. In all the photos of couples that have been together longest, both members appear to have attached or “adherent” earlobes (meaning their earlobes don’t really dangle below where the ear and side of the face come together). This is true regardless of the individuals’ sexual identities. Likewise, she notices that her family photos of couples whose relationships failed were ones in which the individuals had unattached or “free” earlobes (larger, more fleshy lobes that dangle slightly). “How strange,” the scientist thinks, “there’s no logical reason people would be attracted to others on the basis of their earlobes and it certainly wouldn’t affect their relationship success.” But the pattern bothers her over the next couple of weeks. She asks her friends for their extended family photos and finds the same pattern – that lasting couples are by and large composed of people with attached earlobes.

The scientist shares her observation with other scientists. She’s wondering if they should empirically test her hypothesis that lasting couples are composed of people who have adherent earlobes. While some colleagues greet her hypothesis with ridicule, they now have a nascent awareness of potential “earlobe preference” among couples; soon they start noticing the pattern among their own families and friends. They eventually return to tell their colleague, “You might be onto something here.” They decide to launch a quantitative study using a representative sample of couples to see if there is a statistically significant relationship between earlobe form and relationship success. The study, published as “Free vs Adherent Earlobes as Predictor of Relationship Longevity,” found that couples where both members possess adherent earlobes have

relationships that last longer than those of mixed couples and much longer than couples where members both have free earlobes, regardless of individuals' sexual identities.

After this quantitative study, they also conduct a small qualitative study, interviewing couples with different earlobe patterns to learn what sorts of meanings couples attach to earlobes and relationship longevity. Interestingly, the findings of the qualitative study are inconclusive – the couples interviewed were simply confused about being asked about the significance of their earlobes in their relationships. They reported earlobes had nothing to do with how they chose their partner – they weren't even aware of their partner's earlobe style. In other words, earlobe choice as a relationship factor was not legible to them.

The published quantitative study meets deep skepticism by the larger scientific community. However, soon the media begins doing stories on the studies with headlines like “Attached Earlobes Produce Greater Attachment” and “Do Free Earlobes Mean Free Love?” The media attention coaxes research agencies like the National Science Foundation to fund quantitative studies conducted with larger, more diverse samples of couples; these studies also find that couples with attached earlobes have greater relationship longevity. Social scientists work to develop an Earlobe Theory of Attraction to explain why this pattern persists that relates sexual health, earlobes and evolution.

At this point, the binary of earlobe types is an underlying, unquestioned assumption. In the 1930s, scientists did in fact believe there were these simple, binary earlobe types. There are two things happening in this hypothetical example: The establishment of the earlobe binary, and the hypothesis that this binary is related to romantic attraction and relationship stability.

As the attached earlobe hypothesis becomes common knowledge, on-line dating profiles change, always including a sexy photo with a clear view of earlobes. Ear jewelry (which doesn't hide the earlobe) becomes outrageously popular. Some states pass laws to list earlobe type on government forms like birth certificates and photo I.D.s. Politicians running for office prominently feature photos of their earlobes in campaign materials, believing their adherent ears demonstrate their trustworthiness. Movies and television begin to portray free earlobe people as villains, promiscuous lovers and as losers, while celebrities with attached lobes usually save the day.

As the notion of earlobe types and how it relates to romantic relationships gains publicity, over time, people with free, dangling earlobes find themselves facing discrimination in employment and the dating market. Some even have surgery to make their earlobes appear attached.

Eventually, groups of free earlobe people begin to politically organize and challenge the negative labeling, claiming “Free Lobe Pride!” They hold rallies and protests, demanding that earlobes be dropped from government documentation. Some form counter-narratives about the superiority of Free Lobes as creative, free-spirited individuals who offer alternative lifestyles to those of boring, confining Attached Lobe people.

In the middle of the earlobe debate are those who possess ambiguous earlobes that don't quite dangle or adhere. They struggle to have their earlobes recognized as attached or else they too face discrimination, as most people interpret their in-between status as “creepy” and regard them suspiciously. In-Betweens also protest the earlobe

status hierarchy and use their in-between status to challenge the very idea of an earlobe binary. They document how attached and free lobes are actually two sides of an earlobe continuum with a great deal of variation in between – earlobes are not binary. At first In-Betweens are scoffed at, but eventually the scientific community begins to explore earlobe variation. Scientists – after systematic study of human ears – eventually conclude that earlobe types are not binary, but exist on a continuum. However, the social practices and stereotypes attached to both sides of the earlobe binary persist. It takes decades for government forms to change and for media to represent “both” types fairly.

Construction, literally

A *social construct* refers to a phenomenon or category created and developed by society through its cultural and social practices. The fictional earlobe scenario above demonstrates the processes of *social construction*, ongoing practices of the building of a concept (earlobe binary), a theory (binary theory of attraction), through collective actions of groups (like the scientists or the Free Lobe activists), organizations (like the funding agencies of the earlobe research) and institutions (such as the media). The fact that many people participate in a construction process means that what is built is a social act. This is why constructions are usually called *social constructions* (though that phrase contains a redundancy, as nearly all things and concepts that are built require interactions and transactions between persons).

The idea that even concepts and ideas are constructions, rather than notions that exist regardless of human activity – ethereal (beyond human hands and minds) and universal (true for all at all times) – is difficult for some people to grasp for at least two reasons: First is that we are taught otherwise by people and institutions throughout much of our lives; and second is that the idea of construction applied to seemingly universal concepts (gravity; the sex binary) is arrogantly anthropocentric. How dare we humans claim to have made gravity!

The word “construction,” taken in isolation, might conjure images of people wearing hard hats, driving nails, carrying sheetrock, using cranes to hoist steel beams, erecting a building using countless other materials and tools. For understanding how *concepts* are made, buildings and other sites where construction (as we usually think of it) is happening is a useful metaphor. Indeed, we recommend that every time you run into difficulty conceptualizing the construction of a concept (like the earlobe binary, or the sex binary) as ideas that are made, think about buildings and all of the concepts and tools that are required to make those buildings.

If you walk by a construction site in its early stages, you’ll notice workers with machines, pounding large steel pillars into the ground that support a building. The foundation is laid with these pillars, and with thick cinder block walls. Eventually the foundation and steel pillars are hidden from view, as workers cover them with sheetrock and build exterior and interior walls, add windows, a brick facade, and paint. After all of this collective effort, the construction workers (heavy equipment operators, carpenters, plumbers, electricians, etc.) leave the site, their work complete. Residents move into the building. They don’t think about it, yet their lives are shaped by the

building's structure – where bedrooms, kitchens, bathrooms are placed, how many elevators versus stairwells are allotted to a floor, whether there is a gym – all of these aspects of the building's original design and construction impact residents' daily habits and routines, the people they are likely to run into, and even how often they go outside the building. The original design and construction process is now taken for granted, and people simply adapt to the built structure in which they live.

It is no different with ideas, concepts, and categories. Some people lay the initial foundation for an idea, as the scientific, media and government workers did in the earlobe scenario above. In the realm of sexuality, religious scholars formed foundational ideas about western sexuality (for example that sex should only occur between married persons) and religious knowledge was regarded as the ultimate Truth. Since the twentieth century, knowledge workers like scientists (including anthropologists, biologists, geneticists, psychiatrists, psychologists, sociologists) have been particularly productive at laying the foundations of accepted sexual knowledge. Today in the west, scientists have the authority to claim that science has the ability, through systematic research, to reveal the Truth – what Foucault (1990) referred to as “truth claims.” For example, the sexual categories “heterosexual” and “homosexual” originally arose from clinical work and scientific studies on sexual perversions (Katz 2007).

After the initial foundations of a concept are laid, other knowledge workers can continue to build a broader knowledge base around the initial ideas. They conduct more studies on what people representing particular sexual categories are like, their preferences, their behaviors, their health, and so on. French sociologist Bruno Latour (1987) refers to this as a “fact-making process” where new scientific facts are built through scientists' discussions – scientific discourse. *Discourse* describes systems of thought that are composed of ideas, beliefs and practices that systematically construct the subject matter of which they speak (Foucault 1976). Sexual discourse, for example, expands its construction through the actions of reporters in the news media, bloggers, novelists, those posting their thoughts through social media, or people simply talking to friends about the sexual categories. For example, currently, sexual discourse on what it means to be asexual is expanding through accounts in the *New York Times* or *The Guardian*, posts on blogs, and through the studies published by social scientists studying those who identify as asexual, thus launching a fact-making process on asexuality.

The construction of discourse about sexuality, by all of the people referred to in the previous paragraphs, required techniques and tools that knowledge workers use to build particular claims. Some use scientific method as a technique, meaning that their knowledge claims must be based on systematic observations of measurable phenomenon. All use existing ideas (knowledge, concepts, objects, plans, computers, pens, paper, instruments of observation), means of communication (internet, journals), allies (peers, networks) and even energies (sugars, calories) that humans need to do the construction work. When we use the term construction in this paper, we mean it literally, not just metaphorically.

Nevertheless, the metaphor remains helpful for the point we are making. Just like residents who are housed in a building, individuals can find themselves housed within sexual categories, against their will or by their own desire. In the fictional earlobe scenario, Free Lobes were placed into a category in which they didn't want to be placed.

Likewise, people who are disabled or elderly might find themselves assumed to be asexual when in fact they actively desire, seek and find sexual connections with others. For some, the category asexual is chosen and experienced as liberating from society's sexual expectations. For others, it is an unwanted label that does not capture the identity they want to project to the world.

People can also ultimately refuse to live within the categories in which they are expected to place themselves (like the In-Betweens in the earlobe scenario). For example, some people find the gender categories woman and man too limiting and instead identify as genderqueer, which is an umbrella term that means one can identify as both a man or woman, neither a man or woman, gender fluid (moving between genders), or another non-western gender category (gender.wikia.com 2016). These important gender innovators (like the In-Betweens in the earlobe scenario above) pushed gender – and, by association, sexuality – discourse in new directions by arguing that the binary categories woman and man were not well constructed, or were harmful constructions that need to be challenged. The dominant binary gender categories are too limited to all who want to express gender identities in diverse ways. In essence, those who point out the flaws in the intellectual foundations of categories encourage us to build better ideas that better serve the needs of today's gender and sexual subjects.

When studying sexuality through a constructionist lens, we are led to many important and fascinating questions. What concepts, objects and means of communication, and allies, are marshaled to support one conception of sexuality over another? What actors (including non-human actors) are assembling tools in such a way as to make claims that, for example, sexual fluidity is innate, or a lifestyle choice? What are the tools of the construction or deconstruction of sexuality, gender and sex categories? What is being built as alternatives, and how is it being built? What resources are being marshaled to make the alternatives? What existing networks (social ties, associations) are involved in the process of maintaining or challenging gender and sex categories? Whose ideas are cited? What conferences witness the articulation of these ideas? Which organizations are holding the conferences? Who is supplying the funding for the research and assembly of scholars at conferences? What communications networks are utilized for the dissemination of ideas? Thus, inquiry about construction provides many points of entry.

In social scientific work on sexuality, researchers deploy different research methods – to gather empirical data – as part of their fact-making process. For example, Edward Laumann (interviewed in this volume) used large-scale surveys of the American population to gain knowledge about American sexual beliefs and practices. Sexuality researchers also often conduct interviews to learn how people interpret the meanings of their sexual lives (see the interview of Gloria González-López in this volume). Still other sexuality researchers engage in ethnographies where they participate in the communities they want to study and write about their observations as participants.

What is important as we think about categories, beliefs, ideas, etc. as socially constructed is thinking about *how* and *how well* they were constructed, as well as the consequences of those constructions. For example, when we evaluate the construction of sexual identity as dichotomous – the idea that one must be either straight or

gay – what do we think of the construction techniques: Are they based on systematic observation? Did the research include the experiences of people from different class backgrounds, racial and ethnic groups? Did the research include different gender identities (gender fluid, men, transmen, transwomen, women)? Do the research methods fit the type of claims that the authors want to make? For example, if knowledge workers are making claims about all Americans, did they draw from a representative sample of Americans or just a college class? Remembering the construction metaphor helps us to evaluate the quality of an idea not just as a finished product, but in terms of how it was made in the first place.

Constructed or real? That is the (trick) question

Let's pretend that a large number of students reading this book are actually convinced by the earlobe scenario described earlier. They believe that ears can be divided dichotomously and that there is something to the notion that the stability of one's love life relates to earlobe type. In the next 20 years, the earlobe scenario plays out just as we have described above and our society develops an Earlobe Theory of Attraction, including earlobe status as significant to one's sexual identity. If the Earlobe Theory of Attraction became accepted common sense, then how would you answer this question: Is the Earlobe Theory of Attraction real or is it socially constructed?

If you answered that the Earlobe Theory of Attraction is not real, it is socially constructed, then you are not alone. You are in the company of probably many of your peers, and perhaps your professors. If you answered that we have posed a trick question, then you are on to something important about social construction.

When we first learn about ways to categorize humans and human behaviors, we are encouraged to treat those categories as fixed, stable, and permanent. This is no surprise, as the very meaning of categorizing is the act of drawing a boundary between one thing and another. When we construct a category it is as if we were taking a pen and drawing a line, allotting some characteristics to one side, and other characteristics to the other (such as dividing sex into the dichotomous categories male/female even though actual bodies display more ambiguity). Categories are islands of meaning, determinations of difference that distinguish between *this* and *that* which serve as tools for understanding the world around us (Zerubavel 1993). Does this mean we should just give up on categorizing? According to scholars spanning wide-ranging disciplines, thinking categorically cannot be helped; categories are a necessity of human thought, reflection, and communication.

So, we cannot help but to think categorically. For some, this raises the question: Are there categories that just exist – that are natural? Are all categories just creations of the human mind? Whether we regard categories as natural or as human creations, it *seems* as if there is a difference between what we think and what is real – between the ideal and the material.

Consider the title of a popular and important documentary series on race: *Race: The Power of an Illusion*. The documentary shows how race has been constructed with some races believed to be biologically superior and others inferior. Racial categories were institutionalized through slavery and through policies like Jim Crow segregation

and anti-miscegenation laws, with deep and everlasting consequences for entire generations of humanity that remain today in persisting residential and educational segregation. Yet, at this point in time, race is increasingly considered a cultural fiction. Race is an illusion, a social construction.

The separation of constructed and real is also apparent in the way that many people make the distinction between “sex” and “gender.” “Sex” is often presented in essentialist terms as absolute, biologically based categories of “male” and “female,” while “gender” refers to cultural constructions of “masculinity” and “femininity.” Gender is more easily understood in terms of gradations and combinations of gender that are made clear in light of gender-variant practices like genderqueer or gender fluid identities. For many, however, sex is seen as a fixed category with two clear dimensions based on distinctive, patterned characteristics. In terms of “sex,” many people believe that “male” and “female” and even perhaps “intersex” are natural categories. This is unlike how race is often perceived today, where absolute categories are difficult to defend on any natural (biological) basis. What about sexuality? Sexuality categories seem to fall somewhere in the middle of how race and sex are often discussed. There are those who see sexuality as “chosen,” while others claim that sexuality preferences are something that one is born with – biological or “wired” – and is therefore not a choice or a lifestyle. A third position is that sexuality is performative (Butler 1993) in that one does not necessarily consciously choose to perform a heterosexual sexual identity, for example, but rather is subconsciously reflecting and imitating the idealized ways that heterosexuality is depicted in a heteronormative culture.

This brings us to the point that there is no need to draw a distinction between what is constructed and what is real. When we asked above whether the Earlobe Theory of Attraction was real or socially constructed, it was a trick question. If the idea gained consensus, instead we would say that the theory *is real because it is constructed*.

The impossibility of establishing the existence of any category outside of (prior to, disconnected from) human production (Hazelrigg 1995) seems to assert the notion as life as merely a state-of-mind, or an illusion, not real. However, this is mistaken. Constructionism is concerned with how everything – from concepts to objects – is real, not because things refer to some natural condition outside of human production, but *because* of that human production. Things (objects and events) and quasi-things (concepts) are real because they are made. Just as Patricia Hill Collins (1990) argues that both/and frames are more useful than either/or, we can say that race is *both* real *and* an illusion because of how realness and illusion are produced by humans utilizing conceptual tools. Both fictions and facts are realities of human production – a novel is as real as a documentary. The question is not *whether* something is real or artificial, but how that realness or artificiality is suggested, asserted, and proven through the use of (material and immaterial) tools. Thus, the question is not whether sexuality is a lifestyle choice, innate, or performative, but rather how these truth claims are produced and reproduced, and what consequences flow from those claims. This is the task of the analyst, of the social scientist and the historian. So we instead can ask, “What are the means by which something is made real?” We can focus on how well an argument, category or idea is made, and the rules which guided its making.

Given our culture's entrapment in the dualism between real and artificial, the "realness" of the constructionist argument needs explanation. According to Bruno Latour (2005: 88–89) in *Reassembling the Social*:

[T]o say that something is constructed means that it's not a mystery . . . popped out of nowhere. . . . (T)o say that something is constructed has always been associated with an appreciation of robustness, quality, style, durability, worth, etc. . . . (N)o one would bother to say that a skyscraper . . . or an automobile are 'constructed' . . . The great questions are rather: How well designed is it? How solidly constructed is it?

At this point it may be useful to look at the etymology of words like "artificial." The root of that word is "artifice," meaning handcrafted or made. Something artificial is made. Again, this does not necessarily mean that what is made is unreal or untrue. Indeed, to claim something humans have made is "unreal" is nonsensical. To make something can mean to objectify it, to materialize an idea or a notion. The question is not one of existence, but rather the qualities of construction and maintenance. So, for example, if the Earlobe Theory of Attraction became a matter of social consensus, then we would not question whether the theory exists, but instead evaluate the premises upon which it was made (that human ears fall into dichotomous types and that these types are the basis of attraction and ultimately relationship stability). Moreover, we would examine the different practices that maintain the Earlobe Theory's existence – the use of it in government I.D.s, the way stories are told about it in film, television, books and magazines, the way people use their earlobes to explain their identities, etc.

Conclusion

The works that make up this book can be read in a constructionist light as well – as constructs that make claims of knowledge about sexuality. A word of caution is warranted, and brings our chapter to a conclusion: It would be very easy to slip into the notion that a constructionist account means that the social scientist or historian is simply *reporting* on construction processes in all of their intricacies and dynamics. However, the acts of analyzing and writing are also constructions involving assemblages of actors and tools. The writer or scholar is never just a messenger or reporter, but is participating in the act of making the evidence, the argument, the story – they too are construction workers. Thus, they are implicated in *reconstructing* that which they are studying and reporting.

For example, when a sociologist studies a clinic that serves transgendered persons, that scholar is contributing to the associations and actions that they observe when they re-make the scenes they observed in their writings/descriptions. By writing about what they have observed, and analyzing those observations and drawing conclusions, they are breathing life into, upholding, and reproducing the persons, institutions, and situations they have observed. To write or study is not a neutral act, it is a decision to contribute to the ongoing realization of the object of inquiry. In other words, it is a decision to contribute to its ongoing construction. As Latour points out

in *Science in Action* (1987), the most profound way to destroy knowledge claims (especially young claims) is to *ignore them altogether*, to never read them nor ever cite them. To ignore an idea is ultimately to deconstruct it – never mentioning something, never thinking about something, contributes to the atrophy or decay of anything or quasi-thing. Erasure is best achieved by disappearance from discourse. In contrast, to reference an idea – as we did here by resurrecting the 1930s idea that earlobe type is dichotomous – is to remake. Moreover, to cite is to support (even as critique); to publish is to objectify, to fasten or stabilize, through a broader communication.

This book, for example, is constructed by all the authors, the publisher, the companies responsible for felling the trees that produced the paper on which this print is placed (as well as the print makers); all are collectively contributing to the making of the ideas expressed in this volume. It is up to you as reader to determine if the floor and foundation of this building is made well enough to stand upon, and possibly build upon these ideas.

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