Running Head: A DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

A Discourse Analysis of "Social Construction" in Communication Scholarship

Abstract

How has the phrase "social construction" been used among communication scholars over the past 45 years? This paper characterizes some of the ways in which "social construction" as an idea has been taken up in communication scholarship. In particular, the paper considers what is useful and what is problematic in the different ways social construction is used. First, this paper presents trends in usage, particularly from the early 1990s onward, in several top communication journals. Second, ways of using the concept are analyzed in published articles. Third, discourse about social construction and uses of the phrase are examined in three state-of-the art fora in light of the tensions and questions of doing social construction research. Finally, practical implications for the continuing usefulness of the term are considered.

Key words: social construction, discourse analysis, grounded practical theory, communication research

A Discourse Analysis of "Social Construction" in Communication Scholarship

Disciplines are social constructions. They are things that we have made up. They are not terribly old. And like with other social constructions, once we made them up we forgot that we invented them and we think that disciplines actually exist in some fashion. (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009a)

Since Berger and Luckmann's (1966) *The Social Construction of Reality*, the idea of "social construction" has gone back and forth between being utterly radical, and utterly taken for granted. In the social approaches to communication research which emerged during the 1980s-1990s (e.g. Pearce & Cronen, 1980; Sigman, 1987; Leeds-Hurwitz 1992, 1995), social construction developed as a component of interpretivist, qualitative research. As many social approaches in communication research evolved into what is today referred to as Language and Social Interaction, social construction has not everywhere been an explicit focus (there are exceptions, e.g., Buttny, 1993). Though LSI scholars routinely make mention of jointly-constructed interaction in which social construction is implicated, it is noteworthy that the Communication as Social Construction division was created in 2007 as a new interest group in the National Communication Association. This makes relevant the question of whether the use of and continued conversations about social construction as a concept are worthwhile to communication research.

As Leeds-Hurwitz (2009a) states in the quotation above (and elsewhere: Galanes & Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009; Leeds-Hurwitz, 2010), disciplines are socially constructed. In using particular language and treating certain ideas as central, members of an intellectual community shape and re-shape the critical meanings of a discipline, indeed formulating its reality through communication practices. Does the concept of social construction continue to have a practical

role in constructing communication scholarship? This paper investigates how the term "social construction" has been used in the communication field, what is interesting or problematic about its uses, and what implications this has for the life of the idea of social construction.

The purpose of this inquiry is to take seriously the idea that language use is consequential to communities and that participants' terminological choices matter in the everyday construction of meaning. Studying how the use of a term has been used can reveal what about the term is valuable and worth maintaining as well as what problems emerge in its use—and whether such problems indicate that social construction is a lively idea worthy of continued exploration, or whether it is becoming meaningless.

This paper begins by discussing trends in usage of the idea of "social construction," particularly from the early 1990s onward, in several of the top communication journals. Representative ways of using the phrase and its associated terms (social constructs, social constructionism) are illustrated in four randomly-selected publications to provide a closer, qualitative complement to such trends of usage. The paper then presents an analysis of discourse about social construction and uses of the phrase in three state-of-the art fora (Shotter and Gergen's 1994 *Communication Yearbook* contribution, Bartesaghi and Castor's 2008 *Communication Yearbook* contribution, and NCA's 2009 Communication as Social Construction Division's Five Years Out conference panel).

The reviews presented herein are not meant to be exhaustive, and due to their breadth cannot engage in deep analysis; rather, this paper offers a broad view of the terrain of uses of social construction to offer considerations which may then be investigated in more detailed ways in future work. These reviews and analyses reveal uses of social construction that draw attention to worthwhile perspectives which place communication at the heart of human life. Also revealed

is a tension in which "social construction" is sometimes used in service of different (even contradictory) persuasive aims. Though social construction is flexible in its use and what its use may reference, that same flexibility can cause problems if it seems to apply to everything or if it obscures important premises.

The next section sketches a brief overview of what "social construction" has meant, at least in its 1966 origins, and how it is commonly defined in communication research today. Then, an overview of trends in usage of the phrase across several highly-ranked communication journals is discussed. In a discourse analysis of how "social construction" is used in four articles from among these journals, I highlight differences indicated by general usage trends. The following section focuses on more "self-conscious" uses of "social construction" in three key contexts. The paper ends with implications for future practice in using the term "social construction" in communication research.

A Brief History of the Idea of Social Construction

Histories too are social constructions, and the brief overview I provide here is one of potentially several ways of telling the story. In general, the idea and the phrase "social construction" are attributed to *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge (1966).* In this book Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann, sociologists, outline a framework for seeing knowledge and reality as socially constituted: over time, the typification and habituation of certain language practices becomes institutionalized, decontextualized, and thenceforward accepted as a sort of "reality" divorced from constructed origins. Other intellectual contributions to the idea of social construction include Mead's views on the relationship between self and interaction as the basis of social meaning (1934), Schutz's (e.g., 1967) phenomenological approach to social reality (a significant influence on Berger and

Luckmann), and Foucault's analysis of discourse as constitutive of institutions and relationships of power (e.g., 1973, 1977).

Since Berger and Luckmann's (1966) text, attention to social construction and its relationship to ideas of "reality" have featured in numerous intellectual debates among scholars in various disciplines about how far down social construction should go. Several of these debates took place around scientific practices, for instance in studies in the sociology of scientific knowledge (e.g., Bloor, 1976; Collins, 1985; Latour, 1987; Pickering, 1984) and the rhetoric of science (e.g., Feyerabend, 1975; Gross & Keith, 1997; McCloskey, 1983). Such debates prompted further analyses into exactly what sort of "reality" was being "socially constructed." In particular, scholars argued over the extent to which physical or scientific realities could be claimed to be socially constructed.

Based on these arguments, in 1995 Searle's *The Construction of Social Reality* proposed contra the strong school of "universal constructionism" that social reality—not all reality full stop—was what was socially constructed, while Hacking (1999), in agreement, explored the same ontological problem in *The Social Construction of What?* Meanwhile, Edwards, Ashmore and Potter (1995) shifted focus to the discourse of arguments against social construction and their strategic appeals to reality. This indicates that an ongoing debate over the idea of social construction involves the relationship between social construction and different views of reality.

As Craig (2009) points out, interpretivism as a metatheoretical paradigm sees the social world as ontologically different from other realities. Perhaps for this reason, arguments over what sort of reality is being constructed have not been as heatedly prevalent in communication research—which is largely about social phenomena, especially in an area such as LSI. And yet, the relationship between social construction and reality is seen differently among various groups

of communication scholars. The post-positivist and quantitative/qualitative arguments highlighted during the separation between early interpersonal communication research and social approaches to communication provide a classic example of how social construction is interpreted by some as intellectually untenable (Orr, 1978) or even as a threat to the status of reality (see Craig, 1995; Leeds-Hurwitz, 1995; Patomäki & Wight, 2000).

Among some critical scholars and others, the problem between social construction and reality is linked to the relationship between reality and making judgments. The focus on discourse and "symbolic" communication potentially ignores the materiality of social life (e.g., Cromby & Nightingale, 1999), while the "constructedness" invokes a dangerously unethical specter of relativism—that without having some form of reality beyond what is constructed, we have no basis to make ethical judgments (e.g. Burr 1995, 2003). Such critiques seem to see construction as akin to deceit or some form of "anything goes" (see Miller, 1994; Patomäki & Wight, 2000). Scholars of social construction research are quick to counter such assumptions (e.g., Gergen, 1997; McNamee, 2002), but as demonstrated in the analyses below, this struggle over what social construction means and when it should apply is relevant to and visible in how the term gets used.

"Social Construction" as a Discursive Practice

There are many overviews of social construction research in communication, and so I won't be reviewing them here (though see Bartesaghi & Castor, 2008). Instead, I focus on the use of the phrase "social construction." This section gives an overview of the extent to which and ways in which "social construction" has been used in written scholarly practices. The sections of this analysis (1) chart some of the trends in uses of the term, and (2) focus on examples of how social construction was used in particular works. The purpose of this analysis is to identify

techniques for using the term and potential problems which are then examined further in the analysis thereafter. The first section offers a simple word-search analysis of the phrase across several top communication journals and the second analyzes illustrative examples of the context of usage in four semi-randomly selected articles.

Social Construction in Communication Scholarship

In this initial analysis I employed a simple all-text word search of eight top-40 ranked communication journals through Sage, Taylor & Francis, and Wiley-Blackwell publishers' web searches between 1987 and 2011[1]. The phrase primarily occurred beginning in the early to mid-1990s and for the most part appeared steadily thereafter with some journals seeing a surge of usage from the mid-1990s to mid-2000s. The eight journals selected include four general communication journals and four discourse or LSI-focused journals. The table below outlines in how many articles the phrase "social construction" appeared in the text.

Journal	Years searched	Articles mentioning "Social Construction"
Journal of Communication	1987-2011	140
Communication Research	1987-2011	30
Human Communication Research	1987-2011	38
Communication Theory	1991-2011	100
Discourse & Society	1990-2011	133
Research on Language and Social Interaction	1987-2011	21
Discourse & Communication	2007-2011	14
Discourse Studies	1999-2011	51

It is certainly the case that "social construction" is mentioned somewhere in a text on a regular basis. Often there is at least one mention per year. The phrase is sometimes mentioned

multiple times in a single article. Interestingly, there is a high quantity of articles in which the mention occurs in the references but is not explicitly discussed in the content. This accounts for more than half of what appears to be rampant referencing of "social construction" in *Journal of Communication* and *Discourse & Society*, with a notable exception to this being *Communication Theory*. Such trends are not unduly surprising. As more is written on "social construction," more is referenced. As more is referenced, more is, perhaps, assumed. It becomes not an explicit topic, but an underlying basis for the focal research.

And as Leeds-Hurwitz (2009b) points out, much social construction research uses other vocabularies to describe similar impulses. "Social construction" is not the only phrase which marks research of as being within a social construction approach. Other terms used alongside social construction include "social construct," "social constructionism," "social construction theory," "discursive construction," "language construction," "interpretive," "constitutive" and sometimes just "construction." All of these appear to varying extents in the searches above. However, for purposes of analysis in the next section, this paper focuses on explicitly using the label "social construction" to describe a research perspective, subject of study or communication process involved in an analysis.

When "social construction" is indeed used productively in the content of the scholarship, how is it used? The next section analyzes the usage of the phrase in four articles from two different communication journals. The purpose of this closer analysis of discourse is to see what variations exist in situated practice.

Focus on Four Articles

In this portion of the analysis, I focus on how "social construction" is used in context to look more closely at differences in use. After removing all book reviews and articles in which

"social construction" was only mentioned in the references, I narrowed down to the six journals in which "social construction" was still mentioned in the most articles (removing *Discourse and Communication*, and *Research on Language and Social Interaction*). I then selected two journals with comparable mention counts in abstracts and years of articles searched, but with different foci in the field and different orientations to empirical work and theoretical work: *Discourse & Society* and *Communication Theory*. For each journal I selected one article from the first and last page of the chronologically ordered search results by showing six results per page and rolling a die. The results of this are shown in the chart below.

Journal	Year	Author(s)	Article title
Communication Theory	1994	Timothy Stephen	Communication in the shifting context of intimacy: Marriage, meaning and modernity
	2011	Laura D. Russell & Austin S. Babrow	Risk in the making: Narrative, problematic integration, and the social construction of risk
Discourse & Society	1992	Eleanor M. Novek	Read it and weep: How metaphor limits views of literacy
	2011	Sue Wilkinson	Constructing ethnicity statistics in talk-in-interaction: Producing the "white European"

The kind of discourse analysis employed in this paper is influenced by grounded practical theory (Craig & Tracy, 1995). In a grounded practical theory approach, an analysis of discourse should analyze a practice (here, "use of 'social construction' in communication articles"), describe the techniques and discursive practices employed, discuss potential problems encountered in the production of the practice, and identify standards which shape normative ideals of how the practice should be done.

In Novek's (1992) article, "social construction" is identified with how people talk about certain ideas. Novek discusses how public and scholarly metaphors used to talk about literacy associate it with personal attributes. The language itself, and its connotation, shape how literacy is thought and talked about and constrains engagement with the economic, social and political problems involved in literacy. Stephen's 1994 article makes a theoretical argument for situating interpersonal research in its historical context, arguing that the reality of marriage has been differently constituted over time in relation to changing social diversity and gender roles.

In both earlier articles, "social construction" refers the role of discourse in shaping social reality, and the way in which that social reality is shaped differently over time and in different contexts. The focus on *social* reality is perhaps why discussions of ontological or epistemological relationships between social construction and reality do not come up. The 2011 articles emphasize different aspects of social construction, but with overlapping meanings. In Russell & Babrow's article, social construction is cited in association with Berger & Luckmann (1966), Gergen (2000) and Luhmann (2002). Russell and Babrow's (2011) references to social construction usually occur in the form "social construction of risk" but comments about social constructions and what they are occur throughout the article:

> The progressive understandings of time and agency are not simply inherent in narrative or in human experience; rather, they are social constructions we have overlearned and hence take to be somehow external to us, truly independent of our interpretive processes. (p. 241)

In this example, the term "overlearned" is used to indicate that social constructions have this quality of having been learned so deeply that one forgets they have been "learned" at all and sees them as natural, "external," "independent of our interpretive processes." Other references to

social construction qualify it in ways that show its meaning-in-use, including "evolving" social construction (p. 244) and "act" of social construction (p. 247) to emphasize that social construction is an active, creative process which occurs over time. The authors also use the phrase "social constructionist perspective" as a frame for discussing the notion of ontological uncertainty, and identify recursive social construction as a way in which once a social construction is created, it then creates the future reality of what it is to the people who have created it.

In Wilkinson's (2011) article, social construction is identified with the creation of "social facts" (Townsley, 2007) and is not discussed in detail as an approach. Wilkinson (2011) analyzes how social construction practices such as membership categorization construct ethnicity as relevant and "real" categories through self-description. Wilkinson also uses the phrase "social construction of" (in this case, of ethnicity/race statistics) (p. 344). It is the only mention where "social construction" occurs outside of the article's abstract, key words, and references. Nonetheless, it is mentioned in the content of the article and indeed informs much of the article. But rather than focusing on the social construction perspective, as Russell and Babrow (2011) do in their more theoretically-oriented article, Wilkinson (2011) focuses more on how the constructions are achieved:

> The conventions used in statistical data collection, analysis and reporting construct particular kinds of representations of the world. The status these representations achieve as 'social facts' (Townsley, 2007) makes it all the more important to understand both their construction and their (intended and unintended) uses. In particular, official statistics are instrumental in constructing (and reinforcing) the social categories. (p. 344)

In this example, "conventions" and "constructions" are largely interchangeable concepts which serve as shorthand for anything which is socially constructed. The reference to "social facts" indicates that, as in the other article discussed above, social constructions are not objective facts, but social creations. Socially constructed facts offer their own perspectives and ways of viewing the world which are then taken as normal or real.

In the more theoretical papers, there is a stronger emphasis on the idea of social construction as a perspective, taking a historical orientation, and gaining insight into some idea: "marriage," "risk." In the more empirical studies, there is a stronger emphasis on specific practices through which social constructions are formed in situated uses of language: "metaphor," "membership categorization." This points to one major difference in how the term is used, in that sometimes it is used as a metatheoretical or theoretical view and sometimes it is applied to particular socially constructed items. This does not necessarily line up neatly with whether a paper is more theoretical or more empirical. Empirical papers can reference social construction in a literature review without the purpose of their paper being to talk about social construction (in such cases the term is used as a sort of starting point or background assumption). One can imagine that such a practice (a brief, single mention of social construction, perhaps even citing Berger & Luckmann (1966), without mentioning the term "social construction" at all) could be taken up more often by LSI scholars and discourse analysts if there seemed to be a reason for it. This question will be considered at the end of the paper.

In addition to how the term was used in publications theoretically or empirically, "social construction" also indexed multiple different meanings and associations to point out different things about particular topics and subjects of the research, including the following:

Meanings Indexed Through Uses of "Social Construction"
Language/discourse/communication as that which constitutes the social construction

| The historical/changing qualities which indicate the constructed nature of social constructions |
| Taken-for-granted "realness" or "naturalness" which obscure the constructed nature of social constructions |
| The effect which social constructions have on material reality and experiences of material reality |
| The social, relational or joint nature of construction |
| The ways in which social constructions make certain perspectives and actions possible |

The first of this list is perhaps the one which is most apparently useful across wide swathes of communication research, regardless of what is studied or what ontological and epistemological orientations are claimed. However one defines "communication," the point that communication is what constitutes reality puts communication at the center of human life and thus functions to emphasize the importance of communication research. Uses of social construction in communication are partly characterized, perhaps unsurprisingly, by discussions of communication as the constructing activity. This may be part of what gives the concept capital in communication in particular.

The other elements in the list, however, differ in importance (and implications with "social construction") across areas of scholarship. They also each differ in their own implications. The multiplicity of these meanings and their often-implicit nature can be quite valuable. By using the phrase "social construction" to index any one of (or sometimes potentially all) of these associated meanings, scholars provide a recognizable symbol which is open to interpretation. This flexibility in interpretation makes the term useful, but also may make its interpretations broad beyond the point of meaningfulness or could obscure paradoxes in unarticulated assumptions.

In written scholarship, uses of "social construction" occur with some regularity. Sometimes the term is used to investigate an idea. Sometimes the term is used as a reference to a starting assumption. Though this was not analyzed, ideas related to the term can also be used without mentioning the term at all. These scholarly practices indicate that there is variation in

how the term is used and how important using it is assumed to be. Do similar practices in use occur in more metadiscursive contexts which are explicitly *about* social construction? The next section focuses on such contexts as well as exploring potential differences in spoken discourse in intellectual discussion.

An Analysis of Three "Social Construction" Events

When people organize such events which are in some sense "about" the concept to be discussed, use of the particular terms and ideas is more self-consciously done, and more explicit metadiscourse occurs around the community's practices related to the concept. For this reason, the remainder of this paper briefly discusses discourse about social construction in two *Communication Yearbook* contributions (the latter in 2008 which responds to the former from 1994) and in particular analyzes more naturally-occurring discourse in a recorded special panel on social construction which occurred at the National Communication Association in 2009.

As Craig (2006) notes in his discussion of communication as a practice, one indicator of the status of a practice is that a metadiscourse is generated about it with regard to how it is or should be done and how it could be done better. Though all communication is metacommunicative (it communicates both *what* is being communicated and *how* to interpret what is being communicated) (Bateson, 1972), "metadiscourse" here refers to how the communication community talks about (and socially constructs) its own social construction (discursive) practices. It is at this level where problems, dilemmas, contradictions and issues in the use of "social construction" can arise and become explicit topics of conversation in the field. Three fora specially dedicated to discussing social construction in the communication field have been selected for further analysis of the use of "social construction" in communication scholarly discourse.

The first context is Shotter and Gergen's 1994 article in *Communication Yearbook,* in which they propose social construction as a framework for communication research. They use the metaphor of conversation for their approach, and their characterization of social construction is highly interpersonal and relational. Because both scholars are associated with interpersonal communication and therapy research, this is not surprising. These interpersonal and relational connections to social construction are still a couple of the many associations with the concept, as will be shown in the analysis of the third context.

The second context is Bartesaghi and Castor's 2008 response to Shotter and Gergen's (1994) article, in a much later version of *Communication Yearbook*, in which they revisit the proposal, reanalyze social construction as a practical (meta)theory, and contend with critiques of social construction. Social construction is offered not as a theory but as a metatheoretical approach, and is dissociated from the ontological and epistemological concerns which have characterized its emerging use and reconstituted as a practical theoretical orientation. The authors work to broaden social construction perspectives beyond U.S. scholarship, but also to specify the unique ways in which communication scholars do, and have contributed to, social construction research.

The chapter also looks at social construction in context as a way to address the critique against social construction as relativist and nonrealist: Bartesaghi and Castor (2008) use examples of ways in which social construction can be applied in order to get at important questions of materiality, agency, and consequentiality. Their use of social construction indicates a change insofar as social construction can be applied as a framework for improving communication practice. Thus it is not just a descriptive or ontological theory about the world,

nor a research approach which implicates certain methodologies, but a practical theory with implications for application.

These two published contexts reviewed social construction in an explicit way. The term was explored as a theoretical and metatheoretical concept with empirical and practical implications. Though certain ways of treating the term differed—focusing on it as a relational concept in the first context, as a practical one in the second—the uses were largely consistent with one another (the latter being conspicuously a response to the former) and were not inconsistent with the ways in which the term was used across publications in general (as discussed in the prior section). The next context, however, focuses on how the term is used in a different situation—one which is still metadiscursive (an event about social construction as an idea) but in a panel presentation and discussion rather than in a publication.

The third context is in many ways the most interesting for discourse analysis because it features spoken discourse (albeit prepared and sometimes read presentations). This context will be looked at in more detail than the previous two: as an example of naturally-occurring interaction, it offers a glimpse of the construction of social construction's current meanings as they unfold in a particular moment.

The video recording analyzed is of the five years out Communication as Social Construction panel at the 2009 NCA meeting in Chicago, Illinois. At this panel, five communication scholars shared thoughts on social construction before opening the discussion to the room: Wendy Leeds-Hurwitz, John Stewart, Mariaelena Bartesaghi (presented by Theresa Castor), Saskia Witteborn, and Laura Black. The panel had asked participants to respond to two questions (how has social construction contributed to the discipline of communication studies: what has been done and where should it go in the future? Should social construction be seen as

one approach, or as a foundational concept?) and had described a basic framing of what social construction was (the relational or conjoint character of all human meaning-making).

Each participant took up a slightly different concern with the idea of social construction. Stewart, for example, used the concept largely in its original ontological and epistemological way to question what reality "is." Stewart proposed that social construction should underlie all studies of human social life. He examined the philosophical and ontological basis of social construction, arguing that it represents "the way things are for humans" and claiming that everything humans experience is socially constructed, therefore, any study of human experience must involve social construction.

Leeds-Hurwitz focused on its disciplinary implications and the need to expand on the resources scholars use to do social construction research. She emphasized particularly on the ways in which social constructions often mask their constructedness, becoming normalized and reified within particular boundaries of their own making and leaving less room for reflection. Witteborn took a similar tack, questioning the cultural basis of social construction as a perspective. After defining social construction as "the ways in which social beings come to an understanding with and about themselves and the world in and through communication," she argued that the claims often made on behalf of a relational and co-constructed approach to social reality as self expression were themselves cultured and ideological.

Bartesaghi took up the concerns with the consequentiality, materiality and purported relativism of taking a social constructionist approach. She recounted her experiences teaching a graduate course and the varying emotional and intellectual responses to the idea of oppression as a social construct. This highlighted the way in which critical concerns have often sought to challenge social construction: "oppression" is sometimes contrasted as a material experience

against social construction. Bartesaghi used this example to show how people construct the meanings of experiences based on the consequences of interpreting experiences as social constructions. Black offered views on how social construction has been put into practice in the context of public deliberation and dialogue and how practitioners have brought people with differing worldviews together to socially construct new understandings in the face of conflict. This addressed the potentially usefulness of social construction as an ordinary practice and not just a metatheoretical approach.

The panel participants tackled numerous ways of using and talking about social construction in their presented material. These views on social construction can be associated with different assumptions. Some for instance were more critical and others more practical. These assumptions point to some of the aspects of social construction which are not routinely explicated, as demonstrated by how they were responded to in the follow-up questions at the end of the panel. The question-and-answer session, which comprised the last 14 minutes of the panel, included questions from the audience (each of which were responded to by most panel members). The analysis below looks at three moments during this period to look into ways in which social constructionist concepts are constructed in ongoing talk.

In response to the first question Castor discusses multivocality and addresses the concern of relativism. She states that she is "not wanting all constructions to be validated" and offers Bartesaghi's example of talking out implications as a way to judge constructions on the basis of their consequences: "in recognizing there are different voices we don't just have to leave them in isolation but instead um (0.8) think relationally they worked it out and talked it out well what are the practical consequences of seeing things a particular way." In this response Castor addresses a critical challenge to social construction as well as a practical perspective.

This response also makes a connection between relationality and social construction, but in a different way than Witteborn's criticism. In Witteborn's earlier comments, relationality was associated with the idea of personal expression and identified as a Western-centered ideal. Here, relationality is more associated with a Bakhtinian (1981) sense of the interplay of ideologies. This again highlights how even within one association commonly made with social construction—that it is relational—there can be multiple meanings.

In Castor's response, the use of "social construction" did not need to be used explicitly (since the panel is about it)—but the term is a good one for capturing the sorts of things she is talking about. In this example, Castor draws on various ideas related to social construction, but all are recognizable in ways that open them up for potential further inquiry. Someone could have asked for instance, "how this concept of relationality different from what Witteborn was talking about?" or "would critical scholars see anything wrong with taking this practical approach to address the need for making judgments?"

In the next two examples, however, there are fewer opportunities to pursue social constructionist ideas. The following excerpt occurs when an audience member asks a question about how the idea of "choosing" ontological commitments exaggerates the role of personal or individual agency:

Excerpt 1

[Q= question asker, A= audience member, L-H= Leeds-Hurwitz]

1	Q:	Is there any sense that we should need to talk to our students about how
2		these things also choose us
3	(0.5)	
4	A1:	((soft laughter))
5	A2:	that's an (embarrassing) question
6	(7.0)	((panel members look around at each other))
7	Stewart:	sure=
8	Black:	=yeah [(1.0) YEAH]

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 9                              [((laughter))]
10        L-H:          I think you're getting a resounding yes
11        Black:        yeah (.) how do you do that
12        ((laughter))
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In this exchange, the questioner in the audience draws attention to the concept of agency. Though implicated in the concept of construction, this concept is not one which has often been explicitly discussed in communication research. Though it would doubtless be acknowledged by most that participants are both creative and constrained in doing constructions, the critical approach is marked by a tendency to notice constraints. Q's remark thus seems to be inviting a discussion which would consider the more critical conception of social construction.

The panel's response to the remark shows little initial uptake. The participants align quite strongly with what was said (lines 7, 8, 10, 11) but display some hesitation to discuss it further (the long delay of response in line 6, the teasing return of the question on line 11). This does not mean the topic was not going to be elaborated. In fact, conference panels seem to routinely do this sort of thing with certain kinds of questions: looking around for who wants to answer, perhaps erupting in a little chorus of agreement or disagreement or negotiations amongst themselves about who is going to speak, before someone is ratified to officially take the turn. Sometimes this will be followed by several or even all members taking subsequent turns. It is one way of showing that a question has been marked, perhaps as "difficult" (this possibility seems borne out by the audience member's comment at line 5, which was delivered quietly but overheard by the camera). It is possible that the panel might have responded eventually, but another member of the audience interjects during the laughter on line 12:

Excerpt 2

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1        Q:           Two ontological (choices) either reality exists (.) outside of us and can be
2                     measured or it's socially constructed and I think that phrase that you used?
3                     Epistemic humility?=
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4	LH?:	=m hm=
5	A?:	=hm:
6	Q:	Is lacking sometimes on one side that- at least that was my impression of it
7		and that made the conversations with ( ) because I feel like (1.0) on the
8		critical side (.) that makes total sense and on the other side it doesn't
9		make sense (to them) so: and what you were saying yeah there's
10		absolutely ( )
11	Black:	I guess in defense of social science

In this final excerpt, the question of ontology returns and is linked explicitly to reality. Here again the critical approach is relevant, by mention rather than by inference, and contrasted with social science where "social science" seems to refer to traditional post-positivist social scientists. The question-asker's comments propose a difference between critical scholars ("the critical side" line 7) and social scientists ("the other side" line 8) regarding an earlier term used ("epistemic humility" line 3). This term is associated with the social constructionist approach, which does not assume that one epistemology is better or more accurate than another. Black's beginning turn in line 10 (not shown here in full) goes on to explain that social scientists treat their work and their subjects of study as a process and in similar ways to how constructionists would see things.

In these two prior excerpts, there seems to be a tension between the way people refer to social constructionist concepts in relation to commonly-delineated metatheoretical boundaries in communication research (critical, positivist social scientists, constructionist social scientists). In excerpt 1, constructionists are in a sense called to account for a concept relevant to critical research: agency. This concept is related to the meaning of social construction: As mentioned earlier in the paper, one critical way of looking at social construction sees it as contrasting with or obscuring material "realities" such as oppression. Investing ontological choices with agency— in the same way speaking about social construction can perhaps over-emphasize the creative control of participants—is at odds with some critical strands of research.

In excerpt 2, the questioner separates critical scholars from social scientists, but refers to social scientists to mean positivistic social scientists. This seems to align the panel members with a critical perspective (where social construction and epistemic humility "makes total sense," line 8); however, several (if not most) of the panel members would not name themselves as critical scholars. Furthermore, the division between two ontological choices ("either reality exists outside of us and can be measured or it's socially constructed," lines 1-2) is probably not one with which all of the panelists would agree. Social construction "all the way down" has not been a major source of argument since the earlier, more radical-seeming days of social construction (as mentioned in the literature review), probably because it does not need to be (since most communication scholars are dealing with social phenomena anyway). However, a critical approach can reignite the ontological reality question because some critical scholars see social constructions as illusory (perhaps part of the legacy of Marxist false consciousness).

What seems to be going on is that the audience is made up of differently-identified groups of people: critical and social construction scholars mainly. In the two excerpts discussed above, social constructionist concepts were linked to different assumptions and different ways of categorizing intellectual commitments. The terms associated with "social construction" are part of a metadiscursive vocabulary most likely to be used explicitly when the concept is being discussed: terms such as agency, social science, ontological. But these terms are largely used unproblematically, as if everyone will share the same interpretations of them. A feature of multifunctional terms like "social construction" and its accompanying terms is that it is usefully interpretable. Unfortunately, not all interpretations are explained or made explicit, even in situations where their use is visible and under interrogation.

This section presented examples of how the term "social construction" during metadiscursive events about social construction. The section highlighted differences in uses of the term in two state-of-the-art publications before moving to an example of spoken discussions in the context of a conference panel about social construction. Following a brief summary of how social construction was used differently in each panel presentation, I analyzed talk during the question-and-answer phase of the panel to see what other uses of the term might emerge. The next section summarizes the project and its conclusions, discusses implications for practice, considers limitations, and offers directions for future research.

Discussion and Implications

As Leeds-Hurwitz (2009b) has noted, "social construction" is often invoked as a research perspective without the use of the particular phrase. Especially from the late 1980s onward, phrases such as "interpretive," "social," and "constitutive" have been terms which cue a social constructionist approach (Bartesaghi & Castor, 2008). The use of "construction" as well as "joint" and "coordination" are others which emphasize the creative relationship between communication and social reality as well as its emergence through the actions of multiple participants. And yet the phrase "social construction" is employed as a regular practice in communication scholarship.

This paper reviewed some trends in where and how often "social construction" has been used in some communication journals before looking more closely at specific uses within published articles. This was followed by a look at two state-of-the-art publications about social construction, and a convention panel on the theme. Across these cases, social construction was referred to in different ways. Although many of its uses and meanings cohered around similar themes, differences and contradictions arose. Variations in how "social construction" was used

included using it as a perspective (metatheoretical, ontological), as the process of creating

meaningful concepts, as a joint activity, as a way of categorizing intellectual commitments; as

well as to refer to relationality, historicity, means of construction, the relationship between

construction and the material world, practical applications, and possible consequences. These

meanings are certainly related as well as valuable. What makes their multiplicity potentially

problematic is that (1) each of these ideas can also be defined in multiple ways; and (2) they are

rarely specified when people are using "social construction" or talking about it. It's not

reasonable to assume people will define everything they say as they say it—not having to is one

of the luxuries indicated by a term's having become familiar if not accepted—and as mentioned

earlier in the paper, having ideas open to multiple interpretations can be worthwhile, part of what

makes certain terms persuasive.

On the other hand, this can cause potential interactional troubles. In the sense defined by

Tracy and colleagues (e.g., Agne & Tracy, 2001; Tracy, 1997; Tracy & Muller, 2001),

interactional troubles arise from problems or dilemmas in interactional choices, such as what to

say and how to say it. One trouble with the multiplicity of social construction meanings is that

people may not realize they are talking about different things. This will result in such common

experiences as people "talking past each other." Though a variety of resources exist for dealing

with such phenomena (repair, for instance) after the fact, such resources are necessarily delayed

(and one cannot help but think, inefficient) in publication processes, and were not employed in

the example of naturally-occurring interaction analyzed previously.

Another trouble is that the different meanings implicated by a single concept may

sometimes contradict. This is highlighted by the ontological distinctions assumed to characterize

post-positivist social scientists, critical scholars, and social constructionists. Post-positivist social

scientists are assumed to not align with constructionism—yet as Black pointed out in the conference panel, they may follow similar ideas. On the other hand, while many critical scholars and constructionist social scientists may use "social construction," they use the term in different ways with different emphases. One difference is that critical scholars sometimes see social construction as illusions and focus more on their "invented" nature (often invented by elite societal members) of constructions. This is different from seeing all social life as constructed, and more different still from seeing everything in general as constructed.

Even in the quotation by Leeds-Hurwitz at this paper's opening there are markers of contradictions which can emerge talking about social construction. Twice she refers to disciplines as "made up," once calls them "invented," and then states that we think (wrongly, it is implied) that they "actually exist in some fashion." By no means am I about to suggest that Leeds-Hurwitz is secretly harboring realist tendencies of the sort which would thence deem disciplines unreal, unimportant or illusory. Rather, Leeds-Hurwitz's language in describing social construction points to how goals in communication shape forms of talk and are consequential for what is being talked about. Indeed, the quotation is representative of the analysis of the prior section and suggests a possible reason for how the differing ideas about social construction in communication scholarship have come to be.

"Social construction" has been persuasive in part because it challenges assumptions. As with scientific thought experiments which often sound bizarre and feature extreme (even impossible) hypothetical scenarios (e.g., Schrodinger's Cat, Maxwell's Demon), social construction pushed one to rethink what was natural and ordinary and why it seemed so. And by putting communication at the center of (and as an answer to) what constitutes the very fabric of human society, communication scholars could better explain what they were doing, why, and

how it was different from what had come before. Thus, using "social construction" and drawing

on some of its implications about reality is a way of making people rethink how they know what

reality is. But of course a potential unintended consequence of this persuasive aim is that it can

be misinterpreted.

As the Thomas Theorem puts it, "If men [sic] define situations as real, they are real in

their consequences" (attributed to W. I Thomas in Merton, 1968). The realist ontology matters

less to social construction if it is enfolded within a practical metatheoretical perspective, as

articulated in several examples in this paper; on the other hand, it is very much alive in several

areas of critical scholarship. This indicates that there will be problems with the use and

interpretations of "social construction" among social constructionists and critical scholars, both

of whom use and "believe in" the concept while potentially meaning different things by it.

Reformulations of the Thomas Theorem provide other clues as to how different

communication scholars explicitly use (or do not use) social construction based on this

ontological distinction. For example, in an article by Mehan (1990) which begins by quoting

Thomas, the theorem is rephrased: "all people define situations as real; but when the powerful

people define situations as real, then they are real *for everybody involved* in their consequences

(p. 173)" [italics in original].

Meanwhile, in the introduction to *Frame Analysis*, Goffman (1974) presents the Thomas

Theorem as a less interesting question than one posed by William James: under what

circumstances do we think things are real? This is of course an empirical question, and perhaps a

similar impetus has resulted in empirical studies and areas such as LSI seeing less need to deal

with the metatheoretical and theoretical concerns connected to using "social construction." This

seems reasonable, and is implicated by the way in which social construction already appears in

publications. The usefulness of "social construction" is more apparent in metatheoretical and theoretical discussions as well as, and particularly in, metadiscursive events about the status of social construction.

As long as social construction continues to inform communication scholarship—and it seems in no danger of stopping, regardless of how often it is named—then returning to its assumptions seems a valuable exercise. It provides vocabularies and ways of talking about intellectual commitments and assumptions so that such issues can be questioned, analyzed, and developed. It is important that in using the term, particularly in the context of re-interrogating it, being explicit and elaborative about what is meant and how concepts are used will be more helpful in some cases than leaving things open to interpretation or assuming everyone will define and use all vocabulary in the same way. This is part of what needs to be done if we assume we do want to construct the discipline to be one which is reflective about that constructive process.

This paper has presented the results of various kinds of analysis across several contexts. As such, there was a lot of ground covered, but not comprehensively; and there was only so much depth to reach in the analyses. It is hoped that what has been presented herein has provided sufficient data, analyses, conclusions and implications to be worth discussing and potentially exploring. It is both a commentary on what has come before, and a starting point for what ideals should be maintained moving toward the future. Metadiscourse about valued concepts are part of what constitutes what matters and what means in academic communities. "Social construction" is certainly a term which fulfills that function, and deserves as much reflexivity as it should engender.

Whenever disagreements over words arise, different strategies emerge as ways to settle or manage the disagreement. This paper does not, for instance, argue for going back to an original

source (such as Berger and Luckmann, 1966) to capture some definitive or most-true use of social construction. Rather, this paper examined what about how the term has actually been used makes certain meanings and utilizations of it more or less practical for communication research. It seems "social construction" is undergoing a shift similar to that undergone in other important terms—rhetoric for instance, or even "communication." The term is in some sense in danger of becoming useless and meaningless precisely because it has become so useful and meaningful.

Concluding Remarks

Social construction has been an increasingly visible communication approach. From the NCA 2006 summer institute and Galanes and Leeds-Hurwitz's 2009 volume, to the creation of NCA's Communication as Social Construction division and Bartesaghi and Castor's 2008 article, social construction is an active perspective and topic in the communication field. There are many ways of doing social construction research, many questions with which it contends, and many ways of talking about it. The use of the phrase "social construction" is itself a practice which indexes particular meanings and associations which have evolved to accommodate a variety of meanings and functions. As social construction research continues to flourish, the interrogations of what it means and what it *should* mean must retain their visibility *as social constructions*, in part, by remembering how they have been and continue to be constructed.

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[1] This time constraint occurred because either (1) the phrase did not appear before 1987 or (2) the journal was not searchable back that far online (some newer journals do not go back as far as 1987).