

Handbook of constructionist research

By James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium (eds) (Guilford Press, New York, 2008), 832 pp., \$ 125,00, ISBN 978-1-59385-305-1

Historical analysis of the development of societies, the controversies on climate change, incomprehension among religions, discussion on forms of government for the developing countries, the political relationship between public and private, are issues which for many years have induced researchers to use, and decline in different ways, the concept of social construction.

As James A. Holstein and Jaber F. Gubrium maintain, it is very rare to find sociologists who undertake their research without using a methodology attentive to the innovation first proposed by Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann in 1966. Over forty years, constructionism has acquired increasing interest and representation. For this reason, the work of Holstein and Gubrium entitled *Handbook of Constructionist Research* is welcome. Sociologists are often strongly tempted to undervalue handbooks, and this may be one's initial reaction to this "handbook" on constructionism. The title seems almost a contradiction: how can there be a "handbook" on such a diversified area of inquiry as the one which draws on constructionism? After all, as the authors state, "constructionism belongs to no one and everyone, the term of *constructionism* has come to virtually mean both everything and nothing at the same time" (p. 5).

This handbook is first of all a work aware of the risks attendant on defining a semantic field of studies through a "forum" of diverse experiences. The intent of the authors is to depict a composite "mosaic" of different, but often illuminating, bodies of research which share theoretical, methodological and empirical groundings and significance. The book well represents the richness and breadth of sensibility of the constructionist approach applied to research. Researchers will find ample information on and insights into constructionist theory 'applied' to the various fields of the sociological discipline.

The contributions to the handbook do not seek to *define* what constructionism is; rather, they present the entire force and originality of constructionist research, as a *mode* of research which highlights the extreme versatility of constructive processes in terms of discourse analysis, interactional analysis, interview analysis, and the analysis of diverse texts, document and other informational media.

This Handbook produced by Holstein and Gubrium to illustrate constructionist research demonstrates that the richness of this approach is still intact. There was a need for a work such as this, not so much for its descriptions, although these are important, as for its stimulus to reinvigorate freedom of research in the constructionist framework. The contributions, according to their different disciplinary backgrounds, insist on the need to explore the ordinary, the everyday, the purpose being to discover new interpretative opportunities. The most interesting aspect of this approach still consists in this “tension”.

The handbook consists of forty valuable contributions grouped into six parts. Thus created is a highly accessible logic of development which accompanies the reader along a path which outstandingly illustrates the versatility of constructionist research. The sequencing of the book’s parts can also be viewed as a cognitive and cultural journey which restores importance and richness to constructionist research in the various fields of sociological inquiry.

The book begins with contributions by Darin Weinberg and Joel Best, who review the historical and theoretical context in which the constructionist challenge first arose (Part I). There follow (Part II) nine interpretations of the concept from a multidisciplinary point of view. Among the many authors of importance, to be mentioned in particular are George E. Marcus and James D. Faubion working in anthropology, and Kenneth J. Gergen and Mary M. Gergen in psychology. Parts III and IV examine the epistemology of constructionist research and its most widely used strategies. In this case, too, the authors furnish clear and appropriate descriptions which encourage the reader to consider the research experience in new light and stimulate self-analysis. Interesting in this regard is “Autoethnography as

Constructionist Research” by Laura L. Ellingson and Carolyn Ellis, which recommends that knowledge construction be reconsidered as a locus of dichotomies and opposites. “I am passionate about making methods dovetail with life as lived, rather than with rigid procedures”, Carolyn Ellis writes. In this sense, autoethnography is an example of how “multiple layers of consciousness” can be built to connect “the personal to the cultural” (p. 448).

In Part V, the editors have invited the authors to give account of some of the aspects of social life most frequently investigated using the constructionist approach. The choice falls on the body, the emotions, gender, sexuality, race and ethnicity, medical knowledge, and the construction of national identities. As will be seen, the contributions can be grouped into three areas of great importance for constructionist researchers and which correspond to three key questions. How do we build our social identity as “biological” beings? How do we construct the paths that convey us from illness to health and vice versa. How do we construct what we are under the profile of cultural identity?

The authors induce the reader to attune with the most recent advances in these concepts, which directly link with the topic of rights. The epistemology of the various philosophical and anthropological approaches often seems to obscure the importance of the processes that we construct socially within well delimited and connoted bodies. And yet, as Turner writes, “What we share in common is our human vulnerability, which exposes us to pain and indignity, and for which we need the protection of human rights” (p. 506). In this process, constructionist research reiterates our “responsibility” as subjects in determining the structures that determine our lives. Judith Lorber furnishes a crucial contribution on the construction of gender: a social categorization which, with its “certainty”, has always confirmed the problem “of the uncertainty” of social rights. Sarah L. Crawley and K. L. Broad highlight this aspect in regard to the study of sexual behaviours. They assert the need to use constructionist tools to unmask the social that sexuality assumes on itself. The contributions analysing racial, ethnic and

national identities likewise have the purpose of evidencing the “social” that informs and constantly reconstructs them.

The theme of medical knowledge has long intrigued sociology. The contributions by Paul Atkinson, Maggie Gregory, Gale Miller and Tom Strong raise the questions of how medical knowledge is produced and of how the expertise necessary for the medical treatment is constructed.

Constructionist researchers can use the ethnographic approach to evidence the complexity of the experiential knowledge produced by medical personnel and healthcare institutions. The answer once again lies in the capacity of medical personnel to “create” healing trajectories that are above all constructs of a “language for interpreting” the signs of distress emitted by bodies.

In Part VI Gubrium and Holstein close the handbook with a section devoted to continuing challenges. Here eight contributions address borderline issues in which constructionism as a research methodology is compared with other perspectives such as ethnomethodology, ethnography and culture studies. It is impossible to give thorough account of the variety of concepts and contents comprised in this section. Nevertheless these are contributions able to address the handbook to the future. For instance, Dian Marie Hosking asks whether constructionism can be critical: a question which seems almost oxymoronic. Yet the paradoxes of everyday language conceal numerous pitfalls and opportunities for the constructionist researcher.

Amid this wealth of stimuli, perhaps the contributions on liminal research fields could have found space for other topics, such as studies on technology, science and society, and organizational aesthetics. The absence of these certainly restricts the horizons of research but not the importance and usefulness of the work, which is valuable for its close examination of epistemological more than empirical matters.

It is therefore a work to be highly recommended for doctoral students, and generally for scholars wishing to produce knowledge about the world in which we live. But, above all, it is a topical and interesting text for researchers wanting to innovate their research methodology and to advance the constructionist perspective in sociological inquiry.