

Can social constructionism go too far?

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ABSTRACT

In the international literature at least, what is known as social constructionism in housing and homelessness research has become a popular methodological tool. Initially, social constructionism was proposed as an antidote for the inadequacies of positivist approaches in housing research which failed to identify the taken for granted assumptions in the field. As a result, the unquestioned assumptions operating were incapable of challenging orthodoxy in research and housing policy.

It is recognised that social constructionism has the potential to expose the source, location and social function of assumptions, definitions and policies. But, if as social constructionism can imply, everything is socially constructed, then so is social constructionism. Despite some attempts to ignore the issue of reflexivity, constructionism is not immune from its own tenets.

While acknowledging the value of constructionism in research relating to housing and people who are homeless, the latter part of the paper explores the consequences of its tenets when the theory rebounds and recoils back on itself. It does this by examining Ingrid Sahlin's recent defence of the relativist position. The paper argues that social constructionism has the potential to go a long way but that it can go too far!

Can social constructionism go too far?

In the international literature at least, what is known as social constructionism in housing and, to some extent, homelessness research, has become a popular methodological tool (Jacobs et al, 2004; Franklin and Clapham 1997; Hunter and Nixon 1999). Initially, social constructionism was proposed as an antidote for the inadequacies of positivist approaches. The latter were accused of failing to identify the taken for granted assumptions in the field which, while largely unrecognised, influenced research findings. As a result, the unquestioned assumptions operating in research and policy were incapable of challenging orthodoxy in research and housing policy (Burr 1995; Collin 1997; Jacobs and Manzi 2000).

This paper explores some of the implications of the social constructionist approach for housing research and what might be called the theory of knowledge (or epistemology) on which it is based. While recognising that social constructionism is not a homogeneous approach to research (Sahlin, 2006, 176-180; Jacobs, 2004b; 1-11), this paper explores the possibility that at least one version of social constructionism can go too far. By this is meant that there is a 'strong' constructionist position which overreaches itself. If, as some variations of social constructionism can imply, everything is socially constructed, then so is social constructionism. This position, known as the 'strong' position, is generally regarded as defective and is rejected by the majority of constructionists who adopt the 'weak' position. Here, despite the connotations of the label, the weak constructionist position is not more flawed but is actually the more defensible and robust position.

While acknowledging the enormous potential of constructionism in research relating to housing and people who are homeless, this paper argues that the strong version of social constructionism can go too far. However, it is also argued that very few hold this view and so it is important to note how, and to what extent, the weaker version overcomes the problems characteristic of the stronger version. It does this by examining Ingrid Sahlin's (2006) recent defence of the relativist position in social constructivism. Sahlin's defence is used because (1) it is the last of a long list of articles about social constructionism in the leading housing international journal, *Housing, Theory, and Society*, and (2) is a very succinct and cogent statement of the position I am questioning.

Social constructionism

One of the most influential contributions to social constructions came from Berger and Luckmann's book entitled, *The Social Construction of Reality* (1971). In it the authors emphasise, inter alia, the role played by humans in the development of social structures. They point to what they call the objective nature of social reality, of institutions, expectations and practices (Berger and Luckmann, 1971, 65-109). They analyse how the objective social world is subjectively, and even intersubjectively, experienced as real even though it, in turn, is the result of the outpouring of human creativity. It is humans who construct the social world as they externalise thoughts in order to live socially.

Yet as much as they produce the objective social world they internalise it (Berger and Luckman, 1971, 77-79). This means that members of societies and cultures are the creators of the social world they share with others. They are also creatures of it in that they are influenced by it even to the point of reification. Berger and Luckmann use

'reification' to refer to an 'an extreme step in the process of objectivation, whereby the objectivated world loses its comprehensibility as a human enterprise and becomes fixated as a non-human being, non humanizable, inert facticity' (Berger and Luckman, 1971, 106). In other words, in the process of reification humans as producers of the social world are perceived as products rather than creators and agents; human activity is regarded 'as an epiphenomenon of non-human processes' (Berger and Luckman, 1971, 107).

Berger and Luckmann's analysis applied to housing generally

Berger and Luckmann's treatise in general, and the notion of social constructionism in particular, have been applied to the study of a plethora of social issues. And while there have also been important developments in the social constructionist project since Berger and Luckmann (Best 2002; Spector and Kitsuse 1977; Kemeny 1984), the salient points of the position as it has unfolded can be identified in their treatise. The following highlights the primary implications of the social constructionist position as they have been adapted and can be found in the subsequent housing literature.

The first adaptation is that knowledge about social practices, including housing, have been developed by human beings or groups for certain social purposes. They have no other authority other than the fact that over time members of a particular culture or society have generated them. Secondly, the social practices and discourses about issues relating to housing which are taken-for-granted and presented as natural, neutral and unchallengeable have been reified in the sense that they assume an autonomy, independence and power which seems detached and remote from their human history. The origins of reified social practices and socially valid knowledge have been forgotten in the socially validated history. The resulting social amnesia also construes the present as in a time-warp where anomalies and vested interests are regarded as normalcy (Jacobs 2006; Jacobs et al 2003) .

This leads to the constructionist conclusion that if certain knowledge and social practices have been socially constructed then they can be deconstructed. This means that the taken for granted can be challenged, the power of the supposed natural can be neutralised as it is put into context and linked to particular vested interests. In this way the socially included knowledge and practices can be shown to exclude other alternative knowledges and practices.

Thus social 'problems' are really claims made by some groups against others (Kitsuse and Spector, 1977). But if they are social problems about which there is widespread social consensus, then social constructionism can expose how the social practice came into being, for what purpose, in whose interests, what counter information or alternatives have been included and excluded and with what consequences. This problematising of powerful and popular social perspectives and practices has the potential to undermine dominant knowledge and practices.

For example, against the dominant current practices social constructionism has the potential to expose the origins, extent and working of those discourses which demonise and pathologise. It can contextualise and highlight the implications of housing policies designed to normalise sub-populations and sub-groups (Gurney 1999; Marston, 2000; Clapham and Saugères et al, 2000; Jacobs et al 2003; Fopp

1996, 2002). Social constructionism has the potential to demonstrate that such discourses are not normal, neutral and unchallengeable, and can ascertain how policies are operationalised in order to ensure sub-groups are judged and comply with the social validated order and socially credentialed knowledge.

With premises that existing institutions, policies, allocation of resources, definitions, explanations of causation, (mis)representations and discourses are social constructions, this approach has enormous potential for critical inquiry. It has the potential to unsettle dominant and powerful voices who capitalise on their ability to dictate definitions, and propagate explanations and causes for such 'social problems'. It has the potential to explain why some social phenomena are defined as social problems (such as those who are allegedly troublesome tenants) but not others (such as the decrease in affordable rental housing options for low income households) and therefore, set the agenda of remedies (Kemeny 2004). In this sense it is 'critical' in the best traditions of social science.

Four strands of social constructionism

Jacobs et al (2004b, pp. 4-8) set out four different strands of social constructionism in research about housing. The following briefly outlines the strands in order to highlight the forms of social constructionism in research. By referring where possible to more recent examples of such research, the following augments the analysis by Jacobs et al (2004).

Discourse analysis

Jacobs et al (2004b, p. 4) argue that 'the discourse analysis' which, inter alia, has its origins in Foucault and adopts Fairclough's (1995) framework, is the most popular in housing research. This research strand examines the language of popular causation and the dominant discourses associated with housing. For example, it has been adopted to analyse the economic rationalist and neo-liberal management language for 'managing' tenants who are regarded as an 'underclass' (Haworth and Manzi, 1999). It has also been the strand chosen to explore how definitions, and the roles of landlord and lenders and borrowers and tenants, are constructed in the discourse of housing debt (Hunter and Nixon, 1999). The social construction of prevalent metaphors can also be identified in areas such as 'social exclusion' (Marston, 2004) or 'pathways' (Clapham, 2002) and the challenge to metaphors such as 'careers' in homelessness discourse and research (Fopp, 1999; 2007).

The sociology of power

Another social constructionist 'strand' is that derived from 'the sociology of power' (Jacobs et al, 2004a, p. 7). This is based on Foucault's notion that power is not (only) hierarchical, with more at the higher echelons than the lower, but can be identified at all levels. There are networks or nodes of power, so that it is exercised at every level of an organisation. As Gurney (1999, p. 165) points out, for Foucault power is operationalised in a plethora of diffuse and ubiquitous ways in everyday life which have become regarded (in so far as they are thought about at all) as normal, natural, neutral. Consequently, they are taken-for-granted and invisible. In conjunction with this view of nodes and networks of power is Foucault's notion of 'bio-power', in which the tools of calculation in the social and medical sciences are used to change (or 'normalise') human beings (Foucault, 1991, p. 265; Fopp, 1996, p. 216).

According to Foucault, the embodied individual person is the site of the exercise of this power as can be identified in the social functions performed by counselling, social work, psychology and psychiatry. The religious confessional has been transformed in such modern forms of modern 'pastoral power'; the calculated nature of the natural and physical sciences and their resultant technologies can now be identified in the social sciences and their disciplinary and normalising techniques (Foucault, 1977, pp. 215-216, 177; Fopp, 1996, pp. 216-219). Jacobs et al (2004a, p. 6) include in this category Ingrid Sahlin's (1996) research regarding the strategies of exclusion from social housing.

Also to be included in this category are studies on the social functions performed by the lack of post-agency accommodation in the Australian Supported Accommodation Assistance Program (SAAP) for people who are homeless (Fopp 1996; 2002b), and Gurney's (1999) 'Discourses of Normalisation in Public and Private Accounts of Home Ownership'. The latter's statement of the aims of his paper reveals a significant theme in his use of Foucault. Thus, in his paper about the methods and modes by which popular accounts of home ownership become 'discourses of normalisation' Gurney clearly states the way in which Foucault's analysis of power has influenced his research and argument. He expresses it thus (Gurney, 1999, p. 166):

The intention [of his article] is to focus not on the source of power, nor upon who exercises it, but rather, the processes and resistance inherent in home ownership. This statement of intent is included to correct possible misconceptions (which may or may not be based upon a partial reading of Foucault's work) about the way 'power' is used in this paper. The paper is *not* about an attempt by the state to conservatise people as part of a hegemonic project. Nor is it about the power that home owners may exercise over tenants. Instead, power is understood as the name given to a particular and complex situation constituted by the forces and tactics which socially construct home ownership as a majority housing tenure. Crucially, I want to argue that the tenure is imbued with a disciplinary power which normalises home ownership in the same way that Foucault's inmates, orphans and soldiers [in *Discipline and Punishment*] are normalised. The mechanism, processes and outcomes of power are, of course, different in this analogy but homeowners nevertheless are simultaneously undergoing and exercising this normalising power.

While Gurney is true to his intentions it should not be thought that his paper is devoid of implications about the reinforcing of social hierarchies, normalising judgements and an examination (or assessment) of the social processes and institutional procedures which, for both tenants and homeowners, are characteristic of the normalising discourse (Gurney, 1999, pp. 171-179).

Social Problems and Policy Narrative

According to Jacobs et al (2004b, pp. 5-7), there are two 'strands' of social constructionism which have not featured as much in the research and accompanying literature as those previously mentioned. What they call the 'Social Problems and Policy Narrative' approach to constructionism is based on Spector and Kitsuse (1977; Best 2002) who emphasise that what is defined socially as a 'social problem' is merely an interpretation and a claim that is being made. An example of this approach is Keith Jacobs' et al (2003) paper on housing discourse in the United Kingdom in

which they explore the ‘problems’ approach in relation to ‘The Demonisation of Lone Parents’ (Jacobs et al, 2003, pp. 435-438), and the problem of ‘Anti-social behaviour’ as reflected in the tag ‘neighbours from hell’ (Jacobs, 2003, pp. 438-442). It is included in this category because the authors are investigating how the so-called ‘problems’ are constructed and their social implications and significance.

A similar (although shorter) attempt can be found in Jacobs (2006) who argues that ‘the more traditional explanations of housing policy are usually expressed in terms of a rational response to a particular need’ (Jacobs, 2006, p. 12). In the case of disruptions in public housing, the ‘problem’ is explained ‘by the actions of a small minority of tenants’ (Jacobs, 2006, p. 12) whose conduct adversely affects the equilibrium of other tenants. The usual policy initiative required in response to this explanation and definition of ‘the problem’ is to address the ‘small minority of miscreant tenants’. But as Jacob points out, that ‘understates the importance of ideology and power in bringing problems into prominence and the narratives that are deployed by policy makers to justify certain forms of intervention and reject others (Jacobs, 2006, p. 12).

Jacobs argues that the social constructionist approach has the potential to disclose how the current interpretation and policy response have generated ‘the problem’ through ‘negative stereotyping and rhetorical narratives that undermine the status of marginal groups’ (Jacobs, 2006, p. 12). Such residualist explanations of social problems fail to consider other factors such as decreasing funds to public housing, the degradation of public housing stock, and changes in policy so that public housing is not an option for all Australians but has become welfare housing. We might say that the *welfarisation* of public housing is socially constructed.

What allegedly needs to be explained in this ideological apparatus, deflecting as it does attention away from the structural issues, is the behaviour of individual tenants who are pathologised because they have allegedly ‘chosen’ a certain lifestyle. The policy response is usually punitive for such tenants. Even tenant participation measures (for complying tenants) are aimed at reassuring the latter that they are involved in regulating behaviour. Such measures are designed to reassure tenants and the public more generally that ‘the problem is being addressed’ and that they are part of the solution (Jacobs, 2006, pp. 12-13).

Symbolic interactionism

Another constructionist strand which has received very little attention in the housing research and concomitant literature is ‘symbolic interaction’ (Jacobs, 2004b, p. 7). Kemeny (2002, p. 141) goes so far as to say that ‘*within housing research* there has been an almost total absence of genuinely interactionist studies in the constructionist tradition.’ Symbolic interactionism can be variously expressed (Berger and Luckmann, 1971; Blumer, 1969; Garfinkel, 1967) but it is usually understood as emphasising the part played by individual persons in mediating and creating everyday experience. While often associated with ethnomethodology and qualitative methodological research and analysis, it is more than such methods. The qualitative analysis is used to demonstrate how agents sense their socially derived part and place in the culture and internalise and react to their socially ascribed identity.

Symbolic interactionism is sometimes regarded as micro-sociology but it also emphasises the common sense or intersubjective knowledge agents possess and use to negotiate everyday experience. This everyday experience may be mediating symbols which denote hierarchies or power relationships and their attendant expectations. Thus the intersubjective knowledge regarding expectations imbued in the title of a position (Principal, Police Officer) or symbols (such as a uniform or the markings on a vehicle such as a police car or fire-engine) carry a social freight of which members of a culture or sub-culture or society share a common sense and understanding. Symbolic interactionism can be conceived as the way individual persons mediate and negotiate their everyday experience. In making sense of this experience, members of a social, cultural or sub-cultural groups both adopt and, to varying degrees, adapt to the relevant common and intersubjective social expectations regarding that experience. In so doing they are not merely passive subjects but creative and constructing agents.

An example of this approach is Berger's suggestion that, aware of social expectations, individual members of a community are conscious that they are recognised in a certain way and then take on that identity (Berger, 1970). But this process is not unidirectional, that is, exclusively in the direction from the broader social structures to the person. It is the extent of passivity or resistance, the degree of accepting and rejecting the external social judgements, to which symbolic interactionists are alluding when they refer to agents negotiating or mediating their aggregate social experiences.

A classic example of this strand is Paul Willis' (1977) *Learning to Labour: How Working Class Kids Get Working Class Jobs*. The book was a result of a study of boys from 'working class' backgrounds in the United Kingdom who learnt about and negotiated their way through the education system, and the consequences for them and others. Like their more compliant counterparts from wealthier backgrounds, the respondents, who identified themselves as 'the lads', learnt an operationally dominant social distinction between 'manual' and 'mental' work or labour. They, like their counterparts, recognised this intersubjective distinction and in some ways grasped the dividing social function that the distinction performs. Simultaneously, however, they came to accept (although not without some resistance) its social consequences; they recognised that they were being defined in the 'manual labour' category. 'The lads' both saw through the social distinction and became part of it.

While agreeing with Kemeny's suggestion about the 'absence' of this strand of research in housing studies, there are an increasing number of studies which explore the intersecting links between structure and agency in the intersubjective knowledge negotiated and mediated by individual agents. One such in the homelessness area is an analysis of the reactions of women who have been homeless and were residents in accommodation provided by an agency, then lived in their own independent accommodation and subsequently returned (on more than one occasion) to the agency (Parker and Fopp, 2004). While not framed in terms of symbolic interactionism, but a 'secondary analysis' (in the sense that the original investigators did not attempt a symbolic interactionist analysis), the subsequent study of the responses used Foucault's 'technologies of domination' and 'the self' to explore the women's understanding of structure and agency. Thus, the women both recognise the social pressures acting upon them but they also showed signs of ambiguity and resistance to

them as they negotiated and mediated their experience of becoming homeless, and homelessness itself (Parker and Fopp, 2004, pp. 149-153).

Social constructionism – has potential and a way to go!

The previous analysis has indicated what comprises social constructionism and highlighted at least four of its strands. They are not discrete stands so it could be expected that they will intersect at certain points, as at least one researcher has indicated in her own study (Mee, 2004, p. 117). Nonetheless, given that social constructionism in housing research is in its incipient rather than developed stages (at least in Australia), I would argue that it has some way to go before it becomes mainstream in housing research. By this I mean, the approach and its strands, and possible array of their intersections, has the potential to be adopted much more widely in the study of housing (in which I would also include homelessness).

With premises that the existing institutions, policies, allocation of resources, definitions, explanations of causation, (mis)representations and discourses are social constructions, this approach has enormous potential for critical inquiry. If those social things that comprise how housing is socially understood and discussed are contingent, dependent on, and functions of, particular times and places, then social constructionism has the potential to expose how the benefits and burdens of housing and related policies are distributed (unevenly) and are affecting various households. In this way, socially validated discourses are not set ‘in concrete’ as non-human constructs; they are not regarded as true for all time or socially valid, or reified.

In this, what is regarded as largely socially unquestioned is challenged and becomes a problem (problematizing). According to this approach, the dominant discourses about ‘social problems’ are merely claims that have no validity outside the perspective of those who are sufficiently powerful to make them. So the dominant discourses and paradigms which are regarded as the most popular and powerful explanatory accounts of certain problems have no social validity outside the private and corporate interests of those who generate and perpetrate them. Thus, social constructionism provides the opportunity to dismantle the dominant discourses, to deconstructed them, to put them in their place as one explanatory discourse amongst many. In a sense, social constructionism is reductionist in that it reduces a discourse (which can include an explanatory account or a remedy) to the mind-sets and interests of those who advocate it.

As such, social constructionism has enormous potential for research. It is questioning and has the potential to unsettle dominant and powerful voices who capitalise on their ability to dictate definitions, propagate explanations and causes for such ‘social problems’. It has the potential to explain why some social phenomena are defined as social problems (such as those who are allegedly troublesome tenants) but not others (such as the decrease in affordable rental housing options for low income households). In this sense it is ‘critical’ in the best traditions of social science.

But can social constructionism go too far?

The social constructionist project, however, has not been without its critics. The criticisms have been variously formulated but a consistent challenge has come from the apparent relativism of the constructionist approach. For example, according to Jacobs et al (2004, 3), ‘constructionism questions or problematises the notion of

objective truth as such and instead emphasises the contingent basis of social reality.’ This often leads to the conclusion by some critics that there is no such thing as ‘objective’, ‘truth’ or ‘fact’ in social constructionism (Jacobs and Manzi, 2000, 37). In this case, social construction is not immune from this conclusion. It is no more factual or objective as a method than anything else that claims the title.

If social constructionists were denying a ‘real’ world then it would be a case of social constructionism going too far, so far that its own tenets rebound or recoil back on itself. If everything is socially constructed then so is social constructionism itself. It too is contingent. On the one hand, if ‘objectivity’, ‘reality’ and ‘truth’ are only so in terms of a particular time and place, then so is the constructionist perspective. On the other hand, if social construction is exempt from the above thesis, if it transcends the contingent nature of ‘objectivity’, ‘reality’ and ‘truth’, then there *is* something that could be regarded as objective.

Such features of the constructivist position has been noted many times (King, 2004, 38; Collin, 1997, 38). The critic’s argument is valid if the premise is universal, that is, if the premise states that everything is socially constructed, an argument imputed to what is known as the ‘strong’ version of the position. However, most of those who seriously advocate social constructionism do not formulate it in this manner. As Jacobs and Manzi (2000, 38) state,

A more cautious [social constructionist] position maintains that reality is socially constructed but does not entirely reject the notion of an objective understanding of “truth”. This form of constructionism makes the important distinction between ideas and concepts, which *are* socially constructed and the social and spatial processes which have a material existence.

A recent defence of social constructionism— Ingrid Sahlin (2006)

In her recent review of Jacobs et al (2004), Ingrid Sahlin (2006) provides a defence of social constructionism which, inter alia, is intended to respond to the accusations of relativism. It is for that reason that her recent articulation of social construction is examined in the following; it highlights both the pitfalls of the stronger position, and the hallmarks of the weaker.

Although addressing other issues, Sahlin (2006, 178) devoted attention to the ‘relativity argument’ against constructionism because, as she stated, ‘it is, in my opinion, deceptive...’ After restating the ‘relativity argument’, Sahlin proceeds to discuss (1) ‘ontological gerrymandering’, (2) a missing ‘time aspect’ in the criticism of relativism, (3) the defence that the ‘universal-relativity’ argument ... attacks social constructionism from an “alien” discourse’, (4) a defence that social constructionism may ‘facilitate change’ (Sahlin, 2006, 178), and finally (5) a restatement of the constructionist ‘credo’ that ‘we cannot know for sure’ and its implications (Sahlin, 2006, 179). In the following each of these is outlined and addressed in turn.

(1) ‘Ontological gerrymandering’

The analysis begins with Woolgar and Pawluch (1985) who expected the constructionists to argue that all views about child abuse, for example, were merely claims made from within certain perspectives. However, they noted that not all claims were regarded as the same by the constructionists. Various versions of child abuse discourses, for example, were held by some constructionists to be based on

some 'reality' including the reality of the trauma experienced by children (Woolgar and Pawluch, 1985).

This led Woolgar and Pawluch to charge the constructionists with inconsistency. According to this view, the social constructionists argued that all claims were constructions and yet they seemed to hold that some were more real than others; they maintained that all claims were social constructions and then drew a line which protected some claims from this conclusion. According to Woolgar and Pawluch (1985, 216), just as in a political gerrymander electoral boundaries are contrived to favour one candidate from one party, so the social constructionist deploys an 'ontological gerrymandering' which manipulates boundaries of what is 'real' or 'factual'. As Sahlin (2006, 178) expressed it, ontology gerrymandering is 'the tendency to attribute objectivity to the context and consequences of a construction, and sometimes also to preferred versions of a phenomena in focus, which [despite the claim to objectivity] is stated to be socially constructed and therefore relative.'

Sahlin proceeds to agree with Travers' comments (Travers, 2004, 23) that most constructionists would accept that 'They were guilty of ontological gerrymandering as charged'. According to Sahlin, the constructionists simply accepted the 'ontological gerrymandering' criticism:

While Max Travers, when he brings up this problem in his chapter [of *Social Constructionism in Housing Research*], simply states that constructionist researchers have declared themselves 'guilty of "ontological gerrymandering" as charged' (p. 23) King seems to find the argument against constructionism fatal.

While not apparently fatal to Sahlin, I would argue that, whatever the position of other social constructionists, the editors of *Social Constructionism in Housing Research* did *not* merely accept the criticism. They acknowledged and responded to its force by articulating a position which was less vulnerable. As they (Jacobs, 2004a, 3) state,

Since critics of social constructionism have claimed that it denies the existence of an objective material world, it is important from the outset to make clear that there is no attempt in this edited collection to advance such arguments. Instead the claim advanced is that *our access* to the material world is mediated through language and discourse.

Here is a position which exemplifies 'weak' social constructionism, that does not deny the existence of a material world but insists that our access to it is attained through language and discourse. In this instance, as exemplified by Jacobs and Manzi (2000; Jacobs et al, 2004) social constructionism does *not* go too far.

On this point it seems that it is Sahlin who expresses the 'strong' version. Sahlin points to Novick's criticism that if gender differences are socially constructed 'the process causing this must be real, or alternatively, the fact that they are constructed is not itself a social construction.' Expressed differently, 'the argument is that there must be something fixed that is not relative and, hence, not a social construction' (Sahlin, 2006, 178). Then Sahlin (2006, 178) states what she regards as the constructionist position,

However, constructionists would maintain that facts – including claims that something is constructed – are indeed socially and scientifically constructed;

they do not exist as such ‘out there’ but are articulations of a phenomenon (real or invented) shaped in a factual form and relative to the discourse and context in which they were accomplished.

There are several points of note here. First, it is recognised that social constructionism is about identifying and exposing phenomena which are shaped in (usually socially accepted and validated) factual forms. Further, social constructionism has the potential to disclose the constructed nature of social ‘facts’ that are regarded as normal, natural and immutable. But secondly, Sahlin seems to have slipped into the ‘strong’ version of the argument that all facts are socially constructed ‘including’, in her words, ‘claims that something is socially constructed’.

(2) The ‘time aspect’ in the criticism of relativism is missing

The next response to the relativist critique of social constructionism advanced by Sahlin is that it should be ‘possible to assume something temporarily, agree about something for the time being, in order to play the scientific game without attributing the status of eternal truth to the premise’ (Sahlin, 2006, 178). Indeed, it *should* be possible to agree about something in order to play the scientific game. But what are we doing when we play the game? Why are we playing the scientific game? Surely the scientific game is played because it (allegedly) provides an epistemology, or a method or a source of knowledge, which is not merely socially constructed or does not have the pitfalls of the ‘strong version’ of socially constructed knowledge?

I may agree about the assumptions necessary to proceed in research because they do provide, for example, some knowledge on which it is possible to base criticism of housing expenditure, or housing policy or public housing allocation ratios for different households. But the time dimension does not render us immune from invoking some social thing as ‘real’ – even if for that short time! Even if it is only for a moment that we assume or agree on some fact, for that time it is not merely being regarded as a social construction; it is being ascribed a higher status, deserving of our attention, regulating our research, governing our policy recommendations. On this occasion it is not so much that Sahlin has gone too far but that her position points to a material world which, in the time of our agreement, acts as if it is not constructed.

(3) The response that the ‘universal-relativity’ argument ... attacks social constructionism from an ‘alien discourse’

Sahlin (2004, 179) argues that a problem with the accusations of relativism are that they come from an “‘alien” discourse’. The following questions immediately comes to mind: Is social constructionism exempt from external analysis? And if so, why? Is this an immunising technique by which any external criticism is rejected because it doesn’t accept the premises of social constructionism?

According to Sahlin, the unwarranted criticism comes ‘in the language of an objectivist or universalist understanding of the world and with analytical-philosophical concepts and questions developed within another paradigm to defend an account of the world’ (Sahlin, 2004, 179). This defence take some time to address – and takes us on what may appear to be a few tangents - but Sahlin seems to have adopted it from Kemeny’s (2004, 55) response to Woolgar and Pawluch’s analysis of ‘ontological gerrymandering’. He cites their critique that social constructionists

‘manipulate a boundary, making certain phenomena problematic and leaving others unproblematic’ (Woolgar and Pawluch, 1985, 214; Kemeny, 2004, 55).

Kemeny concedes that ‘At one level this [the ontological gerrymandering criticism] is an impossible critique to answer’ because ‘Everything cannot be problematised at the same time and in the same study’ (Kemeny, 2004, 55). Sahlin concurs arguing that a ‘Selective realism, whether explicit or not, is an unavoidable feature for all research’ (Sahlin, 2006, 179). The response is the ““bracketing”” of something in and out, and what is so bracketed ‘will always be an essential strategic decision for researchers to make’ (Sahlin, 2006, 179; Kemeny, 2004, 55).

Undeniably, researchers will bracket, excluding some things and including others, problematising some and not others. But what is meant by ‘selective realism’ which is involved in this bracketing? One possibility is that it has the status of a strategy, a technique, which is a precondition for research. That is, all issues have the same ontological status but, for social research to proceed, it is essential that on one occasion one issue will be regarded as real and another as a social construct, and that this will vary. The assumptions and the premises are malleable. In this case it would seem that boundaries are managed, or even manipulated, for certain purposes in much the same as Woolgar and Pawluch suggest, and this despite Kemeny’s protest that ‘to call “managing this boundary ontological gerrymandering” is a gross and unacceptable distortion’ (Kemeny 2004, 55).

However, at issue in Sahlin’s defence (3) is what is ‘real’ and what is ‘objective’, what they are and to what it is they refer. This is a major topic in itself and it is neither possible nor necessary to trawl through the background of these concepts. Suffice to say that certain social things, rightly the object of social constructionist investigation, are regarded socially as natural, neutral and immutable. For example, certain ideas and practices, explanations and remedies, are ascribed a social status which ensures their power and guarantees their position to demonise and normalise (for example some public housing) groups who by socially valorised criteria are regarded as recalcitrant. It is this social powerful reality, which is regarded as ‘objective’, that comes within the sights of the strong version of social constructionism.

Yet when Berger and Luckmann used the word ‘objective’ they *were* deploying it to suggest that social phenomena are experienced individually by members of a culture (Berger and Luckmann, 1971, 63-146). Such social phenomena are experienced as subjectively real (Berger and Luckmann, 1971, 147-204). The social has an objective reality which is felt keenly and internalised as subjective reality. This does not deny the multiplicity of the ways such social reality is mediated. But it does point to the intersubjective knowledge of valorised social ideas and practices, and institutions which regulate and govern them; this knowledge of social phenomena points to a common sense among members of where they fit and why, and why other others fit somewhere else.

Now, it is accepted in social constructionism - and I certainly do - that this ‘objective’ social world that is experienced in each member (subjectively), and the common knowledge shared, has lead to manifest injustices, enormous inequalities in the distribution of wealth (including housing), social practices that treat some

members as the stool pigeons of others, colonial practices that have involved genocide and dispossession of land and the systemic decimation and dismantling of cultures justified by the discourse and practice of structural racism. These circumstances and the social values and practices which perpetuate them are, of course, social constructions. But is there not something ‘real’ and objective’ about the consequences of such social constructions? Are the unequal distribution of wealth, and the way the benefits and burdens of technology are unevenly distributed, globally and nationally, somehow not real and objectively true for millions?

My argument here is that how such practices which distribute the burdens and benefits of resources are defended and popularised, the discourse or causation and definitions, the demonisation of persons and the justification for socially sanctioned normalising procedures, *are* socially constructed. The practices which cause such inequalities *are* certainly socially constructed but, unless constructionists are poverty- and inequality-deniers, inequalities are no less a burden for the poor and no less beneficial for the rich. To deny such experience of objectively real social circumstances increases the chances of being accomplices to them.

It is now possible to return to the suggestion that the criticism of relativism is from an ‘alien’ discourse. It could be argued that the objective real social world as experienced by social members and outlined in the previous paragraph is *not* an alien discourse at all. Indeed, without some such notion it is hard to see the point of social constructionism. Now, we could simply concede that everything is a social construction, and voyeuristically examine them as we agree to ‘bracket’ them ‘in’ or ‘out’ of our social science. We could do that, but how would such a response detect the social constructions which disadvantage. Yet, despite a position which might deny this possibility, Sahlin is keen to use the constructionist approach to do just that, as the next point indicates.

(4) Social constructionism which may ‘facilitate change’

Sahlin (2006, 179) argues that the ‘fruitfulness’ of social constructionism is its ability to identify and concentrate on what beliefs and practices, perspectives and policies, are borne out of a social context. While King discounts the potential of this approach – as attested by his claim that ‘Calling homelessness a social construct does not make it easier to alter’ (King, 2004, 39) – Sahlin argues that it ‘may facilitate change’ if the stereotypes of people who are homeless (for example, that they are ‘unfit for regular housing or impossible as neighbours’) are not necessarily ‘true’ (Sahlin, 2006, 179). On this point I agree. A weak social constructionism does have the potential to disclose alternative explanations and policies. And I would argue, it does so because beliefs and practices are identified as social constructions based in time and place some of which are more deleterious than others and, as such, at least to the households who are adversely affected by such constructions, they are real, and objective and true.

But, as Sahlin (2006, 179) explains, ‘It [social constructionism] is not a dogma but is itself a discourse, stubbornly relying on a rather agnostic attitude toward what we experience as (objective) reality and awareness of the shortcoming of scientific attempts to pin down absolute and eternal truth.’ Presumably Sahlin means that social constructionism has a rather uncertain or ‘we cannot know for sure’ (Sahlin, 2006, 179) attitude towards what we experience as objective reality. But what does an

uncertain, 'we cannot know for sure' attitude mean regarding our experiences. Are we so unsure of what we experience? And must we be so uncertain of the deleterious experience households face because of inequitable housing policies?

After riding a bike one summer's day I may not know whether the sun or the wind or both caused the burning, redness and blisters on my face but I am certain I have experience the burning of my skin. How far does this agnosticism go? Further, this agnostic position seems to have implications for what Sahlin means by her reference to the social constructivist necessity for 'selective realism'. How is selection possible, on what grounds do we select, if we have an agnostic attitude toward our experience of reality?

As for the 'shortcoming of scientific attempts to pin down absolute and eternal truths', that can readily be addressed by others who hold the weaker version of social constructionism. The discourses that are ascribed absolute and eternal status are only social constructions of a particular time and place and constructionists, presumably, are only interested in them because of the social clout they possess and the repressive social functions that they perform. But this requires something more than a selective bracketing and selective realism which serves the interests of, or makes possible, the social constructionist's inquiry. It would seem to require a position which can identify some beliefs and practises as oppressive and others as emancipatory and liberating.

(5) *A restatement of the constructionist "credo" that 'we cannot know for sure'*

The final aspect of Sahlin's re-statement and defence of the deceptive criticisms of relativism in social constructionism concern the premise that 'we cannot know for sure' or that 'all knowledge is relative'. Sahlin (2006, 179) claims that the editors of the *Social Constructionism in Housing Research* maintain that constructionism has no absolute truth claims. Moreover, Sahlin charges that this version of relativism is primarily epistemological meaning that experience is interpreted in differing ways depending on perspective and position and culture. From this epistemological relativism, a relativism about what there is in the social world follows (ontological relativism), such that we can never be sure or grasp absolute truth about it. This would seem axiomatic but why is getting close to absolute or universal truth an issue? Improving the housing conditions and options for households in low incomes, for example, does not necessitate researchers gaining absolute or universal truth. So why even aim for it or mention it?

But it does become a problem when researchers, such as Sahlin apparently, are so concerned to avoid aiming for certainties that we do not have the wherewithal to say that some housing beliefs and practices, discourses and policies, are regarded socially and politically as absolute and universal. If it is to be emancipatory, as Sahlin commends, there is also an imperative that social constructionism recognise certain interests and perspectives, the implications of which are the objective and adverse experience of certain households. There *is* a need to recognise absolute and universal discourses and policies as social constructions – not because they are 'absolutely' or 'eternally' true but because they are 'real' in the sense that they have an impact (often adverse) on people's lives.

As someone who is sympathetic to many aspects of the social constructionist project it is important that I have a notion of what is regarded socially and politically as absolute and eternal truths – and this, only because these mantras exist socially with deleterious consequences – and one of my tasks is to dismantle them. All my social constructionism requires is to undermine such socially powerful absolute and eternal truths, to place them in a context and location according to certain perspectives and interests, and demonstrate their adverse consequences. To do this I need more than a selective realism which decides what I will examine and bracket off that which I will and won't. I need a notion that there is in reality such socially powerful policies and practices which discriminate, and there are households who actually experience the adverse consequences of such policies and practices.

Conclusion

This article has outlined the origins of the social constructionist position and applied it to housing and housing research. It was argued that socially constructionism has enormous potential to challenge popular and powerful social dominant perspectives, practices, and policies, to expose their contingency, their relation to time, place and vested interest. It was argued that social constructionism in housing research, like a good red wine, has 'legs', and has a long way to go before its productivity, insights and challenges will be exhausted.

However, several aspects of the stronger position were also identified and shown to be deficient. Ingrid Sahlin's recent defence of the relativism in social construction was analysed to highlight both the difficulty with the both stronger version (where it applied) and attempts to overcome it. This was particularly evident in her defence of Woolgar and Pawluch allegation of 'ontological gerrymandering'. There, she insisted that facts – and the implication is that this applies to all facts – are socially constructed. But if so, social constructionism cannot be exempt from this claim. If all socially regarded facts are relative to a time and place, then so is social constructionism. Sahlin's attempt to invoke a 'selective realism' in order to salvage the constructionist project seems inadequate to the task. On what basis are certain social phenomena regarded as objective and real? And why then choose one set rather than another for the scientific exercise? What are the criteria to be used? Is this decision making arbitrary?

What stands in acute tension in Sahlin's argument is that the constructionist project she outlines is intended to offer the possibility of changes for the betterment of households. That is a central plank of her thesis and should be acknowledged. On this point I concur. What is problematic is that her position does not seem to contain a view that what households experience (often adversely) is real or objective. Yet without it the position outlined falters, for how is it possible to remedy inadequate housing and housing policy if the reality of their consequences is merely a construction?

Further, devoid of a view that housing policies are regarded socially as absolute and objective there is little to contest (or little reason for contesting). What is required is some view of reality as 'objective' and 'true' which refers to the actual housing policies which disadvantage, and the experience of those households who are disadvantaged by them. The policies may be socially constructed but they have political clout which is attested in the actual experience of those who are adversely

affected by them. Whether it is sufficient to claim that the material reality is mediated through language and discourse is a moot point – for example, to what does the language and discourse refer? – and for another time.¹

¹ Some readers may be surprised that I have not mentioned ‘critical realism’ or may suspect that I have smuggled it into the analysis of Sahlin. In the context of the limitations of a conference paper I thought it was important as a first stage to attempt an analysis of Sahlin’s formulation of the position on its own terms (that is, to use self-reference and reflexivity as tools of analysis). For more on ‘critical realism’ see Andrew Sayer (2000), *Realism and Social Science* (London, Sage).

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