The Processes of Social Construction in Talk

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Sociologists have paid a great deal of attention to the idea that many aspects of human life are socially constructed. However, there has been far less attention to the concrete interactional processes by which this construction occurs. In particular, scholars have neglected how consensual meaning is constructed in verbal interaction. This article outlines nine generic construction tools used in everyday talk, based on a review and synthesis of past work. These tools fall into three general categories: building blocks, linking devices, and finishing devices. The authors argue that scholars must pay greater attention to the interactional nature of social construction, and discuss three interactional processes that are central to the social construction of meaning in talk: challenge, support, and non-response. The article presents concrete illustrations of these processes using examples from focus group discussions about gender and violence. These micro-interactional processes often reproduce, sometimes modify, and (more rarely) resist larger institutions and structures, and thus are indispensable to understanding social life.

In sociology, it has become commonplace to argue that many aspects of human life, from identity to shared belief to social institutions, are socially constructed. Writers across a wide range of disciplines take this general approach, although they do not always use the term "social constructionist."[1] Although there is a shared sense of what "social construction" means—that the phenomenon in question is the result of social and interactional rather than purely structural or individual processes—the theoretical basis, methodology, and level of analysis of these writings varies tremendously.

Social construction theory has provided a compelling explanation for many kinds of social behavior. One reason for its widespread influence is that it emphasizes human agency, providing an alternative to more essentialist explanations. For

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example, the idea that gender is socially constructed is an appealing alternative to theories that rely on biological (and therefore assumed to be fixed and unchangeable) differences between women and men to explain gender inequality (Kennelly, Merz, and Lorber 2001).

Although scholars have paid a great deal of attention to the *idea* of social construction, they have paid far less attention to the concrete social *processes* by which people create, reproduce, modify, or resist social arrangements in interaction. Many writers simply assert that some phenomenon is socially constructed, and then proceed without further reference to how that construction occurs or even who is doing the constructing. Even those authors who attend to how meaning is constructed typically do so in a piecemeal fashion, examining one method of construction in a single arena. This lack of focused attention to the processes of social construction leaves the constructionist perspective vulnerable to critics such as Ian Hacking, who argues that social construction is a "slogan" rather than a well-specified theoretical perspective. In many constructionist works, he writes, "there is no indication of what 'social construction' means, nor any attempt to exemplify it." (Hacking 1999:35)

In this article, we argue that for social constructionist claims to be taken seriously, authors must attend to *how* people construct meaning, identity, or social institutions, instead of simply claiming that they do. Moreover, we believe that scholars must pay more attention to the *social* nature of social construction. Theoretical treatments, both classic and recent, do emphasize interaction. For instance, Blumer (1969), following Mead, argued for the central role of interaction in the development of meaning. West and Zimmerman's foundational piece on "doing gender" clearly states that "gender itself is constituted through interaction" (1987:129), and Lyng and Franks' (2002) work insists on the importance of "transaction." Yet much published empirical research relies on individuals' thoughts or reports about interaction (often obtained through individual interviews) or media messages rather than analyzing the interaction itself.[2] Individual utterances and media messages are, of course, social products; even when alone, individuals interact with imagined others, and media messages are the result of complex social processes. However, analysis of the concrete details of interaction is notably absent from most social constructionist research.

Interestingly, one tradition that *has* attended to the concrete collaborative processes of social construction has done so without using the language of social construction. Conversation analysis, and to a lesser extent ethnomethodology more generally, has focused on detailed sequences of interaction: how interacting individuals structure conversation, achieve interactional orderliness, establish and maintain intersubjectivity, and construct "reality." Conversation analysis is profoundly empirical and social: it starts with the data of everyday, real-world conversations, and analyzes sequences of interactions, not simply individual utterances. In these ways, conversation analysis takes precisely the approach we would advocate. However, conversation analysis and social construction theory diverge in their scale. Conversation analysts have focused primarily on the meaning of particular actions

produced in interaction (e.g., questions or requests), and how interactants jointly construct these meanings. Those who call themselves social constructionists, in contrast, focus on more macro levels of meaning (e.g., concepts, identities, or social structures such as gender and race), and attempt to address institutions, structures, and power—topics that conversation analysis often keeps on the periphery. This article argues that a blending of the fine-grained empirical detail and interactional focus of conversation analysis with the more macrostructural concerns of social construction theory will substantially enrich both literatures. We believe that attending to the micro-processes of talk is invaluable to studying the formation and contestation of macro-orders of meaning. The processes of talk in micro-interaction are not without consequences, and these consequences extend far beyond the immediate sequencing of any particular conversation. Examining the processes of talk gives us a window into macro-order meanings that both propel and flow from conversation. In short, talk matters in the production and reproduction of social structure.

Our article is divided into two interdependent sections. In the first, we review and synthesize the existing literature to describe nine tools of social construction. We also discuss the contributions of conversation analysis, which we see as the foundation for the social construction of meaning. In the second section, we examine how people use these tools to construct meaning in talk, focusing on the social nature of this construction. We discuss three basic patterns of interaction that contribute to social construction: challenge, support, and non-response. We illustrate concretely how these processes work (and how they rely on the nine generic tools discussed in the first part of the article) using examples from focus group conversations that show the interactional practices through which people create, reproduce, and sustain ideas about gender. Although our empirical focus here is on gender, we believe the processes we describe are applicable to social construction more generally. We intend this article to contribute to the development of a more complete theory of social construction.

METHODS AND DATA

To assess the state of knowledge about the processes of meaning construction in conversation, we reviewed and synthesized a wide range of literatures. We began by searching *Sociological Abstracts* for those articles and books that used the phrase "social construction" in their titles or abstracts; these works in many cases suggested other relevant reading. This review included work primarily in sociology, but also in psychology, women's studies, social work, philosophy, linguistics, speech communication, geography, and cultural studies. Our reading obviously did not include all social constructionist works, even in sociology. However, by the end of the review of several hundred articles and books, we had reached a point of saturation—in other words, we were finding few new ideas about how meaning is socially constructed.

We followed an approach similar to that taken by Schwalbe et al. (2000) in their article on the reproduction of inequality, using the literature as data to be analyzed.

In reading each piece, we paid particular attention to any discussion of concrete processes of social construction in interaction.[3] We then "asked of each study a question that typically guides the coding of qualitative data: *Of what more abstract category of phenomena is this an instance?*" (Schwalbe et al. 2000:422; italics in original). We worked with these abstract categories, grouping similar processes and attempting to develop a typology that encompassed the total set of phenomena using the fewest distinct categories. Our final formulation includes nine tools of social construction, which fell into three groups, as we describe more fully below.

To illustrate the interactional processes of social construction, we turned to an existing data set drawn from the first author's prior research on the construction of gendered vulnerability (Hollander 1997, 2001). This data set includes verbatim transcripts of thirteen small (four- to eight-person) focus group conversations about violence, conducted between 1995 and 1997 in Seattle, Washington.[4] Participants were recruited from a wide variety of pre-existing groups, including churches, workplaces, apartment buildings, classes, and organizations. Some groups were comprised of strangers; other groups knew each other well. The seventy-six participants' demographic characteristics generally approximated the characteristics of Seattle residents (see Hollander 1997 for details). However, each group was relatively homogeneous, to facilitate disclosure and discussion (Morgan 1988). The two-hour discussions were "self-managed" (Morgan 1988), with only minimal involvement by the facilitator. The principal question members of these groups were asked to discuss was "How do you feel that the issue of violence affects you personally, or affects your friends and relatives?"

Because their role in this article is purely illustrative, we did not perform new analyses of the focus group data. Rather, we used these data as a resource from which to draw clear examples of the processes we describe, centered around a central theme of gender. The transcripts contained many examples; those we use here were selected on the basis of their clarity and relevance to the theme.

These data set certain boundaries on our analysis. We limit our discussion to the social construction of meaning that occurs in interpersonal verbal interaction: talk that usually happens in face-to-face situations, but that can also occur via various information technologies, such as the telephone or the computer (Couch 1995). Thus our analysis does not address larger-scale public discourse such as the media or the law, although many of our comments may also apply to these contexts.

Further, we examine only the talk itself, not the other channels of communication that are part of face-to-face interaction such as appearance, body language, display or exchange of material objects, and physical interactions such as violence or affection. Although there has been growing attention to these nonverbal dimensions within the conversation analysis tradition (C. Goodwin 1979, 1984, 1994, 1995, 1997; M. Goodwin 1997; Jefferson 1984; Maynard 1985), we found very few mentions of them in the social constructionist literature. Therefore, we do not discuss nonverbal communication here, although it is our hope that social constructionists will take up this important topic in the future.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that the interactions we discuss here occur within the context of social institutions, systems of hierarchy, and other social structures. Although individuals construct meaning through interaction, they do not do so freely, or independent of macro-level processes (Flaherty 1992). Indeed, we believe that the "micro-macro" dichotomy is a false one, and that these levels of analysis are not separable (Berger et al. 1998; Maines 2001; Stolte, Fine, and Cook 2001). For example, the conversations we excerpt are influenced by larger cultural discourses, which provide frameworks for experience and interpretation (Encandela 1997; Maines 2001), allow for the creation of shared status beliefs that benefit already advantaged groups (Ridgeway and Erickson 2000), make some things easier to say (and to hear) than others (Plummer 1995), and provide models to be used in face-to-face construction. Further, interactional pressures serve to facilitate some constructions and discourage others. These pressures are themselves determined by the larger structures of hierarchy and power in which they occur. As a result, although novel constructions are possible, most interactions replicate already-existing patterns, thus reinforcing existing institutions and structures. Although we do not address the macro level in detail here, we recognize its influence and seek to draw out the connections among these different levels of analysis. At the same time, we argue that an examination of social construction in micro-interaction expands our understandings of how large-scale social problems, inequalities, and meanings are reproduced and transformed.

THE PROCESSES OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION: TOOLS FOR BUILDING MEANING

Many types of meaning are socially constructed in interaction, including identities, events, social problems, social structures, inequalities, and abstract concepts. Regardless of the specific focus, speakers employ similar tools to construct meaning. These tools are "generic," in the sense that they occur across a wide range of situations. In reviewing the literature, we found that though writers used different labels to describe them, nine basic types of tools recurred. We have grouped these nine tools into three categories (see Table 1): *building blocks,* which form the basic units of construction; *linking devices,* which place these building blocks in relation to each other; and *finishing devices,* which suggest preferred interpretations (i.e., how hearers should orient toward the meaning under construction).

Although analytically separable, the nine tools are not mutually exclusive: they often occur together, and at times overlap. Moreover, these tools are used dynamically; a social construction is never "finished" and is always subject to modification, elaboration, or even destruction. Although it is crucial to analyze the social and interactional aspects of construction, in this section each tool is abstracted from its social context, because the literature on social construction itself tends to focus on individual utterances rather than on interactional sequences of utterance and response.

TABLE 1.   Tools of Social Construction Used in Everyday Talk

Building Blocks	Linking Devices	Finishing Devices
Categorizing	Explaining	Framing
Symbolizing	Storytelling	Evaluating
	Forecasting	Emoting
		Rhetorical devices

We remedy this gap later in this article, where illustrations from the focus group discussions show how these tools work together in face-to-face interaction.

Foundations

Before turning to the tools themselves, it is important to consider the foundations on which social construction rests. How do humans manage to communicate? How do they achieve mutual understanding? How, in short, does the vastly complicated process of interaction occur, and occur so smoothly that we are rarely conscious of it?

Answering these questions is where conversation analysis and ethnomethodology excel. In order to communicate effectively, interactants must establish and maintain a common understanding of what is going on in a situation, as well as a mutual awareness of this understanding (Garfinkel 1967; Schegloff 1992). They must construct a shared sense of objective reality and recognize each other's interactional competency (Gubrium and Holstein 1997). They must negotiate who will speak first and for how long, and when and how the next speaker will respond (C. Goodwin 1979). If difficulties arise in the conversation—if, for example, it becomes clear that a listener has misunderstood a speaker's intended meaning—the error must be corrected (Jefferson 1987; Schegloff 1992). Through detailed analysis of ordinary verbal interaction, conversation analysts have developed a fine-grained understanding of how interaction is itself socially constructed. Conversation, it turns out, is deeply structured; there is an orderly "scaffolding of social interaction" (Gubrium and Holstein 1997:126) and a toolbox of procedures that allow communication to proceed in an orderly and comprehensible manner.

This scaffolding, conversation analysts have clearly demonstrated, is *socially* constructed and maintained. Interactants jointly build common understanding, and it is necessary to examine an entire sequence of talk, not just single utterances, to understand how this is done. A large body of work in conversation analysis examines this "procedural infrastructure of interaction" (Schegloff 1992). Without this foundation, studied in so much detail by conversation analysts, the more macro levels of meaning construction discussed in the social construction literature could not occur.

Environments

All meaning construction is built upon interactional foundations. Equally important, all construction occurs within a particular social context. Indeed, it is perhaps

more accurate to say that all construction occurs within a range of contexts, from the very local to the very macro (Schegloff 1997). The construction metaphor is again helpful here: just as a physical structure is built on a particular physical site, with specific soil, climate, light, and neighborhood features, so is meaning constructed within social contexts that entail specific linguistic and cultural resources, expectations, social institutions, and power structures. Whereas conversation analysts have attended principally to local conversational and interactional contexts (see Gubrium and Holstein 1997; Heritage 1984), social constructionists have tended to focus on more macrostructural contexts. Although Heritage (1984), Scheff (1990), and Schegloff (1992) point out that larger institutions come into being through the structured sequences of conversation, conversation analysts pay less attention to the ways in which large institutions and systems of stratification shape the meanings that are created in talk. It is this embeddedness of the macro in the micro, and vice versa, that is the theoretical promise of social construction. Integrating the concept of "environment" into our construction metaphor is one step toward fleshing out social constructionism's micro-macro connection.

Building Blocks

The first group of construction tools, *building blocks*, includes the most basic processes of social construction: categorizing and symbolizing. Both are ubiquitous: it is difficult to imagine how conversation could occur without them.

Categorizing

Categorizing is the sorting of people, objects, and experiences into contrasting groups. According to Zerubavel (1991), "we transform the natural world into a social one by carving out of it mental chunks we then treat as if they were discrete, totally detached from their surroundings" (p. 5). Fearon and Laitin (2000) write that categories include two main features: rules of membership that set the boundaries around a category, and characteristics believed to be typical of members of that category (Gubrium and Holstein 1997; Sacks 1979). Categories are relational: they take on meaning only in context. According to Maracek (1999:162), "words do not have single, immutable meanings; instead, they take their meanings from the systems of opposition in which they are embedded."

Categorization is often manifested through language choice. Although some choices are transparent (for example, in conversational English one has little choice but to use the word "elephant" to describe an elephant), most selections are more complex, entailing a choice among multiple words with quite different implications. For example, using the phrase "broken family" to characterize the consequences of divorce privileges a particular version of reality and suggests a particular path for political action (Arendell 1992). Thus categorizing can be "artful," strategically chosen to further the speaker's interests in the situation at hand (Gubrium and Holstein

1997; Roth 1998; Schegloff 1988). Similarly, when individuals or groups contest new categories, there is "an order of revolution which is an attempt to change how it is that persons view reality" (Sacks 1979:9). Category change, in other words, is an attempt at social change.

Many conversational processes build meaning through categorization. *Forms of address*, such as "Ms.," "Mrs.," and "Mr.," or "he" and "she," place others in categories (Gubrium and Holstein 1997). When research participants are asked to decide which behaviors should be *labeled* "sexual harassment" (Wilson 2000), they are engaging in categorization. When we *describe* a person or event, we are also categorizing (McCall 1990; Potter 1996). This is also true in the case of *self-categorization*: when we make claims about ourselves, when we identify with particular others (Gilmore and Crissman 1997; Hunt and Miller 1997), or when we coin new categories to describe ourselves or others like us (Sacks 1979), we classify ourselves as particular types of people. When we *compare* one group to another (Wolf 1990) or make *distinctions* between them (Cuba 1984; Lempert 1995; Schmitt 1991; Strauss 1982; Zerubavel 1991), we are categorizing. Finally, *examples* are instances of categorization; they both illustrate and help define the category (Cavender, Bond-Maupin, and Jurik 1999; Muehlenhard and Kimes 1999).

Categorizing is so ubiquitous as to be virtually invisible; this increases its power to construct meaning. As Gubrium and Holstein note, categorization is not simply an individual behavior. Listeners may participate in producing a description (see also Schegloff 1988) and descriptions are accountable: "Descriptions must make sense: they must convince socially defined, culturally competent listeners that the objects, actions, or events in question warrant the attributions and categorizations that are bestowed upon them" (Gubrium and Holstein 1997:132).

Symbolizing

Symbolizing involves using a particular word, object, or image to summarize and evoke a larger meaning (e.g., Blain 1988; Frey, Adelman, and Query 1996). Symbols are contextual: for instance, the female breast is an erotic symbol in the United States, but not in all cultures (Victor 1978).

Symbols help to construct identity; for example, women use "natural and social symbols" such as illness or maternity clothes to construct a pregnant identity (Miller 1978). People also use symbols to create and confirm relationships with others. In "forbidden relationships," such as affairs between married men and single women, private jokes and names take on symbolic significance (Richardson 1988). Concrete objects can also be symbols; for instance, Websdale describes how activists hung children's shoes around a state capitol building to construct and dramatize the danger of sex predators.

Metaphors are a more elaborated form of symbols: "the core of metaphor is the analogy that A is like B in certain critical respects, and this makes the implicit claim that A should be treated as B" (Fine and Christoforides 1991:377; see also Gubrium

and Holstein 1997). Like categories, symbols and metaphors can be used to attain particular goals in interaction. For example, patients and employees at an Alzheimer's care facility used the metaphor of family to construct the meaning of their relationships to each other as caring rather than purely instrumental; calling residents "aunt" or "sister," and "residents" rather than "patients," helped accomplish these ends (Vittoria 1999). Similarly, Websdale (1996) found that media outlets used the metaphor of darkness to represent the threat of evil in the construction of sex predators, a threat that was contrasted with images of childhood innocence. Fine and Christoforides (1991) label this process "metaphorical linkage": using metaphor to connect a new situation with another, better-known situation. This kind of linkage can call attention to a new social problem or make a trivial problem seem more serious, thus changing its meaning. Meaning also changes because the symbolic system in which it is embedded is dynamic. "Because symbols are metaphorical, ambiguous, and polysemous, and because it is through relational patterns of symbols that meaning emerges, meaning construction depends on the mechanism of individual and collective interpretation of experience using established cultural models" (Kane 1997:271).

Linking Devices

Speakers create relationships among categories and symbols by building frameworks that organize building blocks, placing them in relation to each other. Three kinds of linking devices are frequently found in the social construction literature: explaining, storytelling, and forecasting.

Explaining

Explanations for why a particular event or behavior occurred are a pervasive element of everyday conversation and thought (Miller 1989; Strauss 1982). Explaining is central to social construction, as explanations suggest the causal linkages that undergird differing perspectives.

Attributions, perhaps the simplest form of explanation, are inferences about causality: what factors are responsible for a particular phenomenon? People make attributions about individual or group traits; for example, a boy's preference for playing with trucks is often attributed to gender rather than individual personality (Cosgrove 2000). Attributions are also made about individuals' actions, as well as their *lack* of action. For example, expert discourse on battered women includes attributions about why they do not leave abusive relationships; these attributions can be external (e.g., economic dependence) or internal (e.g., beliefs about marriage; Loseke and Cahill 1984). Accounts are another form of explaining (Scott and Lyman 1968). According to Rohlfing (1997), interactants must agree on what has occurred in the past in order to proceed with the co-construction of the future. Accounts, if they are accepted, construct consensual meaning about past events that provides the basis for future action.

Explanations can be explicit, but can also be implied through the use of categorization. According to Gubrium and Holstein, "typification is also a mundane form of explanation. Assigning an action to a typical category provides a set of typical motives for the actions, as well as suggesting typically expected outcomes or possibilities" (1997:138). Labeling someone a "freedom fighter" rather than a "terrorist," for example, implies an entire constellation of meanings, motivations, and political allegiances. Although categorizing and explaining overlap and, indeed, may occur simultaneously, they are analytically distinct. Categorizing is the sorting of phenomena into groups with implied characteristics and features, whereas explaining is the building of a framework that proposes the cause of a behavior or outcome. A category may imply an explanation, but the two are not identical.

Storytelling

Storytelling is a second type of linking device (Couch 1989; Maines and Vilmer 1991; Plummer 1995). Storytelling relays to others a sequence of past events that occurred in a particular context. "A narrative assembles individual objects, actions, and events into a comprehensive pattern; telling a story turns available parts into a meaningful whole. Contrasted with, say, a mere list of objects or actions, a narrative can be seen to have a concerted order or structure, an orientation to the temporality of occurrences, and active, if flexible, linkage between elements" (Gubrium and Holstein 1997:147).

According to Maines (2000), narratives are composed of three elements: events, the sequence in which they occur, and the plot, which gives meaning to the events. Indeed, the sequencing of events itself provides meaning, because "sequence inevitably involves causality" (McCall 1990:147). However, storytelling is distinct from the simple explaining described above. Although stories often include implicit or explicit theorizing about why events happened, their temporal dimension distinguishes storytelling from explaining. For example, a speaker might explain a child's preference for a particular toy by reference to his or her sex; this is a simple attribution ("boys will be boys"). However, the speaker might instead recount events in the child's past that led up to this preference: "When Johnny was a child, he loved to play with dolls. But when he started school, other boys teased him for doing so. One day he came home and told me he did not want to play with dolls any more, only trucks." Although this kind of storytelling contains an explanation (Johnny prefers trucks to dolls because he was teased), the framework being constructed is far more elaborate, joining places, people, and events in relation to each other over time.

As with the other tools described here, choices about what to include are fundamental to storytelling. Multiple narratives are always possible (Geist and Hardesty 1990), and so "storytellers decide where to begin and end, what order to put events in, and what events to include or exclude; literally, they decide what to tell about what happened" (McCall 1990:147; see also Evans and Maines 1995; Gergen and Gergen 1984). Because stories are told to particular audiences, those audiences in-

fluence how the story is told (Katovich and Hintz 1997); stories are collaborative productions (C. Goodwin 1984; Gubrium and Holstein 1997). Recipients of a story can respond in a variety of ways (attending actively to it, disattending it, commenting on it, reframing it, starting a secondary conversation, and so on), and these different responses can shape the story as well as its interpretation (M. Goodwin 1997).

Stories are not constructed in a vacuum. Patterns of storytelling and story-receiving are widely shared among members of a culture (Gilgun and McLeod 1999; Plummer 1995; Pollner and Stein 1996; Storrs 1999), and stories help to construct and maintain collective memory (May 2000). Audiences are more likely to hear narratives that are consistent with prevailing patterns (Evans and Maines 1995); these patterns may even affect how people experience events (Maines 2001). An equally important issue is what kinds of stories are *not* told: what varieties of experience are taboo, are silenced, or are shared only among particular groups or in particular social settings.

Forecasting

Whereas storytelling constructs versions of the past, forecasting constructs possible futures. A variety of related processes fall in this category, including predicting, warning, expecting, threatening, wishing, planning, proposing, requesting, and advising. These vary on the degree of certainty suggested (for example, a prediction suggests a higher degree of certainty than a request) and the time horizon involved. However, all involve projections onto the future. For example, Websdale (1996) shows how authorities' predictions of recidivism helped to construct sex predators as a pressing social problem. Padavic (1991) describes a conversation with her superior during her employment as a coal handler in a predominantly male power plant: "He reassured me that if I were in an accident he would take me 'to the emergency room and wait there with you so you don't get scared'" (p. 286). This hypothetical plan helped to construct the young female worker as fearful and in need of protection, while constructing her older male supervisor as a competent protector of women. Although Padavic does not describe her immediate response to the supervisor, she does note that his warnings made her feel afraid, jumpy, and unsure of her abilities on the job. Projections of identities (either desired or feared) can also be a component of forecasting, as in Markus and Nurius' (1986) concept of "possible selves." In the early 1990s television dating game *Studs*, for example, contestants' answers to the question "What are you looking for in a man [woman]?" provided prescriptions for desirable gendered identities; contestants often oriented themselves to these prescriptions in subsequent talk (Hollander 1998).

Self-fulfilling prophecies, although less explicit than predictions or warnings, are another type of forecasting. An individual's expectations about how a person will behave or how an interaction will proceed often elicit the very behavior he or she expects. For example, in Rosenthal and Jacobson's classic study (1968) of student performance, teachers' beliefs that particular students would excel affected teachers'

interactions with students, thereby producing performances that matched the teachers' expectations. Thus expectations about the future help to create that future (see also Skrypnek and Snyder 1982).

Forecasting can also include challenges to normative identities. Consider the following example, in which a woman discusses how she would respond if assaulted:

> I've never been physically attacked when I was under threat. But my underlying instinct or intuition is that they'd better be damn good, cause I've got enough anger and rage from what happened as kids, and that kind of thing . . . I'm not going to tolerate it, I'm not going to roll over and just give in. I think I probably am intellectual enough that I would definitely weigh benefits and consequences. But if somebody came up from behind, I would fight and fight hard. (Hollander 2002:474)

This speaker projects her behavior into the future, forecasting that her reaction to violence will not conform to expectations for feminine behavior. Her prediction both resists feminine expectations and presents a model for other listeners, providing an opening for gender change.

Finishing Devices

Finishing devices are tools speakers use to add shades of meaning to the frameworks they have built. As with finishes such as paint, fixtures, or polish, finishing devices do not change the underlying structure that has been built; rather, they alter the appearance and tone of the structure. These devices include framing, evaluating, and emoting, as well as other rhetorical moves.

Framing

Any experience or behavior can be framed in a variety of ways (Goffman 1974). Although framing has been most frequently studied with respect to social movements (e.g., Snow et al. 1986), similar processes operate in everyday conversation. Frames, in Goffman's sense, are "the principles of organization which govern events— at least social ones—and our subjective involvement in them" (pp. 10–11). These "'schemata of interpretation' enable individuals to locate, perceive, identify, and label occurrences within their life space and the world at large. By rendering events or occurrences meaningful, frames function to organize experience and guide action, whether individual or collective" (Snow et al. 1986:464). Frames help to answer the question "what is going on here?" by providing an interpretation of the situation: "A frame is characterized not by its contents but by the distinctive way in which it transforms the content's meaning" (Zerubavel 1991:11). For example, the issue of abortion in the United States was framed as a church–state issue in the 1972 *Roe v. Wade* Supreme Court decision. Subsequently, however, both anti-abortion and pro-choice activists have shifted to a civil rights frame, focusing respectively on the fetus' right to life and women's right to control their bodies (Luker 1984; Oliver and Johnston 2000).

The building blocks and linking devices described above are often used in framing. For example, Anderson and Umberson (2001) argue that male batterers categorize their own and their partner's violence in very different ways in order to encourage a particular interpretation of the situation. In their study, men framed their own violence as "rational, effective, and explosive" as well as fear-provoking, but described women's violence as "hysterical, trivial, and ineffectual" (p. 363). Similarly, storytelling not only transmits a description of incidents that have happened in the world, but frames those incidents and provides a preferred interpretation of them. For example, Arendell (1992:157) describes how a man going through divorce reframes his partner's discontent with him or the relationship in order to "rationalize or discount his own participation in the demise of the marriage." In both cases, these framings help to construct both gender difference and masculine identity.

Although building blocks and linking devices contribute to framing, these elements are distinct. Categories, symbols, and stories help build particular framings of a situation; the frame is the resulting overall sense of "what is going on here." Of course, speakers do not develop new frames in every conversation; in most cases, they select from a shared stock of common frames. Moreover, powerful actors have a greater ability to select and enforce framings that will serve their own interests (Williams 1998). The ability to successfully enforce a particular frame plays out not only in large social systems and institutions, but also within everyday conversation.

Evaluating

Conversation may involve the ranking of categories or the affirmation of existing rankings. Speakers can convey these evaluations in multiple ways. Most obvious is the explicit expression of attitudes in conversation, often through categorization. For example, sorority members judge others' dress as more or less "slutty" (Hunt and Miller 1997). Evaluating may also be implicit or invisible because the rankings invoked are taken for granted. For instance, when boys treat girls as contaminating (as in the pollution ritual of "cooties") or use the label "girl" as an insult, they contribute to the devaluation of femininity relative to masculinity (Thorne 1993). Evaluations can be conveyed through claims of worth (Strauss 1982) or, alternatively, claims of *un*worth, as when a husband devalues his wife's carework (Arendell 1992). The application of positive and negative sanctions also conveys evaluation: when scuba divers are negatively sanctioned for excessively risky behavior or praised for their competence, these comments establish a ranking of different behaviors (Hunt 1995).

Evaluations are often collaboratively built. Recipients can signal their own assessment by interjecting comments (Goodwin and Goodwin 1987; M. Goodwin 1997), or can "upgrade" or "downgrade" a proffered evaluation through their response (Pomerantz 1984). Clapping (Heritage and Greatbatch 1986) and booing (Clayman 1993) are other forms of evaluation that are ordinarily performed collectively. According to Eder and Enke (1991), "the first response to an initial evaluation strongly influences subsequent responses" (p. 494); thus evaluations are collaboratively

constructed. According to Goodwin and Goodwin, "assessments constitute a most important resource for collaboratively building within the talk itself an interpretive context that will be utilized for the analysis of subsequent talk and action" (p. 49). Listeners' responses help speakers determine how their audience is aligning to the talk and adjust their utterances accordingly.

Emoting

A distinctive finishing device is the use of emotion in conversation. Various writers have referred to this as "evocative communication" (Couch 1992), "emotional talk" (Staske 1996), or "interpersonal emotion management" (Thoits 1996). Regardless of the label, emotion is pervasive in conversation (Staske) and helps construct the meaning of both what is said and the interaction itself. People emote *with* and *with respect to* others: they can experience emotion together, or toward and about others (Couch). Emoting in conversation occurs through the use of emotion terms (e.g., "angry" or "happy"), metaphors (e.g., "on Cloud Nine"), and metonymy (e.g., "smiling to myself") (Staske). Although rarely discussed in the sociological literature, physical expressions of emotion (smiling, frowning, crying) are obviously also important to conveying emotional meaning in face-to-face interaction.

As many scholars have argued (Ellis 1991; Flaherty 1992), emotions are themselves socially constructed; one experiences emotions within particular contexts and with respect to the "feeling rules" of a particular culture (Hochschild 1979). Within conversation, interacting individuals collaboratively produce emotions and their effects on meanings (Francis 1997). Emotional expressions may be "upgraded" or "downgraded" (i.e., made more or less intense), or denied outright through interaction (Staske 1996). In any case, an emotional attribution "must be sustained by one's partner if it is to be incorporated into shared understandings of self, other, and relationship" (p. 123). People not only manage their own emotions, as described by Hochschild (1983), they also attempt to control the emotions of others, a process that Thoits (1996) labels "interpersonal emotion management." Because emotions are widely perceived to be involuntary, emoting can be a potent tool for constructing meaning because it may be perceived as an especially authentic expression of underlying feeling or experience (Staske).

A special kind of emotive communication is the use of humor, or non-literal remarks "which have as their intent the creation of amusement (laughter, smiling, verbal appreciation) in an audience" (Fine 1984:84). Jokes, teasing, sarcasm, and other forms of humor help to construct meaning, often by categorizing and labeling people or situations. According to Fine, three features distinguish humor from "serious" interaction: humor calls for immediate audience response, it contains dense layers of meaning beyond the obvious, and its implications can be denied without the speaker's losing face (pp. 85–86). This last feature is especially important, because it permits speakers to communicate about otherwise taboo or inappropriate topics.

Although seemingly playful, humorous interactions can also carry weighty messages about what is expected from oneself and others. Speakers often use humor as

a tool of affiliation, creating (or delimiting) social bonds (Ducharme 1994; Fine 1984; Lavin and Maynard 2001; Padavic 1991; Sanford and Eder 1984). Thorne (1993) observes that teasing among schoolchildren about "liking" someone of the opposite sex serves to create and reinforce both notions of gender difference and expectations of heterosexuality. Similarly, Hollander (1998) shows how contestants used jokes about the desirable qualities of a blind date to construct ideas about appropriate gender characteristics on a television game show, whereas Eder, Evans, and Parker (1995) find that insults and teasing can, at different times, both reinforce traditional gender beliefs and provide an opportunity to challenge them. Using humor is thus a strategy of social control: a means to enforce normative boundaries as well as resistance (Ducharme 1994; Fine 1984). Humor is also a strategy of interpersonal emotion management, a performance that can enforce the feeling rules of a situation or create solidarity among interactants (Francis 1994). Although seemingly trivial, "humor as a metaphorical, symbolic, paradoxical construction is capable of conveying powerful messages. In this sense, humor in interaction means more than it says" (Fine 1984:97).

Using Rhetorical Devices

Finally, a variety of rhetorical devices can enhance the persuasive power of a proposed social construction. For example, *quantifying* increases the perceived authority of an idea by "creat[ing] the scientific illusion that subjectivity and politics have been transcended. . . . When the perceived objectivity of numbers is added to ideas, the value and power of the ideas are enhanced" (Hughes 1995:402). *Invoking experts* may similarly increase the credibility of a particular construction (Fine and Christoforides 1991). Speakers may *magnify* particular events to make them seem more significant. In advocating for Washington State's predator law, for instance, the media told "atrocity tales" and used sensationalist language that exaggerated the degree of danger (Websdale 1996).

In his excellent analysis of the social construction of reality, Potter (1996) identifies a range of other rhetorical devices that speakers use to make their descriptions seem more objective and factual. These include downplaying the speaker's own interests, invoking corroboration by others, including detail, using empiricist discourse (e.g., "it was found that," rather than "I found that"), employing agency-obscuring verbs (e.g., "where the killing happened" rather than "where he killed her"), extremitization, minimalization, normalization, and abnormalization. Like the other finishing devices, these rhetorical moves help speakers shade the meaning of their utterances, suggesting particular interpretations to their audience.

EMPHASIZING THE SOCIAL: BRINGING INTERACTION BACK IN

Thus far, we have discussed the tools speakers use to construct meaning in conversation. Although essential, these tools are only part of such construction. In order

to fully understand how meaning is constructed, it is essential to examine how this process is *collaborative*—located in interactions among people, not simply in their individual utterances. As Couch (1989:446) vividly wrote, "One will acquire greater understanding of how a cake is constructed by observing a cake being made than by attempting to analyze a baked cake." Moreover, meaning itself is located not simply in an individual utterance, but in the linked sequence of responses to the utterance (Mead 1934). In order to understand an utterance, it is necessary to analyze the context in which it occurs, the utterance itself, the activity that is being carried out through it, and listeners' responses to it. Charles Goodwin (1995) provides a clear example of this collaborative process in his analysis of conversations with an aphasic man who lost the ability to speak because of a massive stroke. Although only able to signal "yes," "no," and "and," this man was able to convey complex meaning using resources provided by others' speech. Goodwin suggests that this unusual case teaches us something about ordinary conversation: that "the production of meaning emerges through a collaborative process of co-construction" (p. 252). Speakers look to listeners' responses to see whether their utterances are understood: "The point here, and it is a crucial one, is that *however* the recipient analyzes the first utterance and whatever the conclusion of such an analysis, *some analysis, understanding, or appreciation of the prior turn will be displayed in the respondent's next turn at talk*" (Heritage 1984:255, emphasis in original). This response thus helps establish the meaning of the original utterance. Such responses, of course, are also strategic in that they aim to accomplish the speaker's goals.

In proposing a particular construction of meaning, speakers can employ any of the nine tools described earlier; yet simply using these tools does not ensure that a construction will succeed. Other people, groups, or institutions can challenge or discredit an attempted construction or can offer a competing one. Alternatively, others can support the construction and increase the likelihood that it will succeed, or they can simply ignore the construction entirely. Moreover, these responses function as interactional rewards and punishments, affecting the likelihood that similar constructions will be attempted again. It is essential, therefore, to examine the interactions within which these tools are used in order to understand how social construction happens. Moving beyond static and individually focused analyses of the construction of meaning, there are three basic patterns of interaction that can follow a speaker's attempt to build meaning: support, challenge, or non-response.

Support

Proposed constructions are more likely to succeed when others affirm, extend, or otherwise support them. Expressions of support can be direct agreement, as when listeners respond with "yes," "I agree," or other clear expressions of approval (Pomerantz 1984). Support can also be nonverbal, as in the nods and smiles (Mason-Schrock 1996) or applause (Hollander 1998) that signal approval of particular constructions. Back-channel responses (interjections such as "uh huh" or "mmm") similarly rein-

force a construction in progress (Goodwin and Goodwin 1987). Support can also be implicit: listeners may produce a response that presumes or builds on the initial speaker's point (Roth 1998).

Listeners can also play a more substantive role in social construction, as when multiple people collaborate in telling a single story (Eder 1988; Gergen and Gergen 1984). This collaboration can be sequential, as Mason-Schrock (1996) describes in the transsexual support group he studied: a longer-term group member would model an appropriate construction of identity, and the new member would then imitate that construction in telling his or her own story. Mason-Schrock also observed older members guiding these new members' constructions by asking strategic questions about the new members' pasts, thereby eliciting stories that fit the accepted patterns. Gubrium and Holstein (1997:154) call these kinds of story-provoking questions "narrative incitement."

Subsequent speakers can affirm or elaborate the story that is being told, as in the following example. Here, participants in an all-female focus group were responding to the facilitator's question about how violence affects their everyday lives. About twenty minutes into the discussion, the participants moved from describing situations that made them uncomfortable to projections of what they would do "if something goes wrong" and they were assaulted. Meg, an older white woman living in downtown Seattle, explained that she carries pepper spray in case of danger, and told the following story to illustrate its effectiveness:[5]

> MEG: That's why I carry the pepper spray. . . . I took a class up at Discover U., and I walked. It was October, so it was light when I walked out, but I realized as I got near the school that everything was going to be shut when I came home. It was going to be dark. So [on my way home] I . . . got to the corner and these two really fit-looking, tough-looking guys were coming along . . . and I heard one of them yell—I forget what he called me, you know some derogatory term, "that old bitch," or something like that, to the other, "How come you let that old bitch get away?" And one of the boys said, "She has mace." . . . You know how they know? Because my keys are hanging from it, and I guess they are so used to looking for that—I keep it with my finger on the spray as I carry them so I don't have to find anything, I could just work right away. But my keys are hanging down, and I guess that's what tells them that I've got the mace.
>
> RHONDA: But you know, even in the wild, with lions and leopards and other predators, they are very careful about getting injuries to themselves. This is true, and I think it works the same way.
>
> LOUISE: I think you are so right. The people that are running in the streets are so close to what those animals are doing . . .
>
> RHONDA: Human predators do not want to be injured.
>
> LOUISE: That is what I'm saying. We as a—
>
> SANDRA: I never thought of that.
>
> LOUISE: I really think that is where most of the violence is coming from . . .
>
> LEANNE: Yes, it is.

In Meg's initial statement, multiple tools of social construction are visible. She employs categorization ("two really fit-looking, tough-looking guys," "that old bitch"),

accounts ("that's why I carry the pepper spray"), explaining ("You know how they know? Because my keys are hanging from it"), and forecasting ("I could just work right away"), as well as storytelling. Rhonda, who speaks next, implicitly agrees by building on Meg's analysis. She uses the metaphor of wild animal behavior to frame the men's behavior as predatory: they are like animals, and should therefore be treated with caution. This is, of course, also an explanation, as is made clear by her comment that "I think it works the same way." Other speakers elaborate on this explanation ("predators do not want to be injured"). What is most crucial about this interaction is that each contribution builds on and supports what has gone before. By affirming and supporting Meg's analysis ("I think you are so right," "I never thought of that," "I really think that," "Yes, it is"), the group collaboratively builds a shared meaning for Meg's experience: a naturalized view of gendered violence as a struggle between predators and prey. This meaning emerges only in the sequence of responses; again, meaning is located in the response, not simply the original utterance. The other group members solidify Meg's initial interpretation; the success of her proposed construction depends on their support. More importantly, this particular sequence of conversation reinforces notions of gendered violence as natural, immutable, and unavoidable. As small as it may seem, this type of interaction reinforces a larger system of gender inequality that views male violence and female vulnerability as natural, normal, and inevitable (Hollander 2001).

Challenge

Not all proposed constructions are built this smoothly; attempts at social construction can be derailed in a variety of ways (Hollander 2002). Perhaps most simply, they can be misunderstood, necessitating a repair by the initial speaker in a subsequent turn (Heritage 1984; Jefferson 1987; Schegloff 1992). Proposed constructions can also be challenged, either directly or by offering a competing construction. In the following example, the women in a mixed-sex focus group were describing their experiences of harassment at the hands of men, when a male participant challenged the framing of one of these experiences as violent:

> MARIE: A concrete example: I was driving down the freeway one day to work . . . and I had a gentleman in what looked like a nicer, newer model car, and he was an older gentleman, blowing the horn and trying to get my attention and he was making kissyfaces at me, on the freeway, at sixty miles an hour, making kissyfaces at me. <laughs> And so I, you know, maybe that's not in and of itself an overt act of violence, but I think, what was the purpose of this? <laughter> I mean, I'm gonna stop my car and—
>
> BOB: That's so juvenile, but is that violent? Or is that, I mean, this is such a hypersensitive age, but is that [violent]?
>
> CARL: I think so too . . .
>
> MARIE: I think it's a continuum, and once you've started down that continuum, I think you think, you know, just one more degree isn't going to make that much more difference?

DESIREE: And I don't consider it violent, but I think more, what controls my
   life? And it's like if I walk around Greenlake alone, some guy's gonna walk
   with me or say something rude, if I'm on the bus, some guy's gonna spread
   out and lean, and try to look down my shirt.
BOB: No! Do people do this?
DESIREE: I've had guys in their forties, start kinda, they bump their hand and
   then they start rubbin' up and down,
MARIE: Or they accidentally put their hand on your thigh,
BARBARA: Oh I, when I used to wait tables, I used to wear dresses, and I used to
   sit there and pour coffee and people would rub their hand up underneath
   your dress.
BOB: Oh my god.

Categorization is contested in this excerpt. Marie tells a story about her experiences (in the process, categorizing the "older gentleman" in terms of age and class) and suggests that the man's behavior is, if not violent, then something akin to violence. Bob, however, challenges this construction, suggesting that making "kissyfaces" to strange women on the highway should be categorized as juvenile behavior, not violence. Such challenges, according to Goodwin and Goodwin (1987:42) "call into question a speaker's competence to properly evaluate the phenomenon being assessed." However, we can also examine Bob's challenge of Marie's assessment as a moment in which not only authority or even meaning is contested. It is also a moment in which *gender*, as a structure of power, is socially constructed and negotiated. Bob's challenge is essentially an attempt to reframe the behavior as a prank, rather than an assault. After Carl supports Bob's reframing, Marie elaborates her construction: violence is a continuum, and the gap between "kissyfaces" and violence is only one of degree. Desiree then proposes an alternative framing that is a slight modification of Marie's: that although this type of behavior is not violence, it does control her life. She provides examples of similar incidents, including forecasts about what might happen were she to walk around Greenlake or ride the bus alone. At this point Bob attempts another challenge, this time expressing disbelief about whether these kinds of incidents really happen. Desiree, Marie, and Barbara then collaborate to shore up the framing of these incidents as troublesome, sequentially telling stories that provide more evidence that these things do, indeed, happen. In the end, Bob seems to concede, expressing not continued challenge but shock at the experiences described by the women.

The combination of support and contention in this example is typical of much conversation, where participants struggle over multiple meanings of the same event. It is clear from the example that disagreement is an interactional process—one person does not start an argument alone (Maynard 1985). Participants muster a wide range of tools to support their preferred interpretations and attempt to derail competing possibilities. Here, they use categorizing, framing, explaining, forecasting, storytelling, and emoting in the form of humor. Often the struggle over meaning happens in a predictable sequence. Miller (1989) found that meaning negotiation occurred in a "problem claim–response–counter response sequence" in which

subsequent contributions "involved the expression of new themes that were super-imposed on previously expressed framings of issues and situations, thereby chang-ing them" (p. 325). Such patterns are visible in this section of conversation.

The challenge to Marie's proposed construction in the preceding example is ob-vious; however, challenges can also be more subtle. One indirect way an audience member can contest a social construction is by trivializing it through jokes, laughter, or demeaning language (Hollander 2002), or through other forms of "byplay" (M. Goodwin 1997). Constructions can also be reframed to suit others' purposes. In such cases, the challenge is indirect, but no less dangerous to the success of the orig-inal construction. Consider the following exchange among participants in an all-female focus group, in which Karen talks about being attacked by a man wielding a gun:

> ELLEN: Well then, how did you respond? Do you feel comfortable talking about it?
>
> KAREN: Well, I won't go into total detail, but basically I got mad enough to take the weapon, throw the weapon, and beat the shit out of him. [laughter]
>
> MULTIPLE VOICES: Go girl! [laughter, whistling]
>
> KAREN: But it was very scary for me. He didn't scare me with his gun. He didn't frighten me that much. What frightened me was the amount of anger that came out of me, and had to, and actually got lost in the rage. And I could have killed him with my bare hands—I think that of all the violent acts and things that have occurred to me in my life up until that point, by men, as a child, as a teenager, I took out on that one particular guy. And I could have killed him. . . . But it didn't frighten me, him having a gun, because if I have some-one who's going to have the nerve to come at me that way, I'm going to use everything I have, they're going to have to kill me to get whatever they want. I'm going to use everything I have, and grab anything I can. I mean, they're going to be marred somehow, if they get what they want. It's just—I think I've experienced enough, that I have enough anger that I just, you're not go-ing to do that to me. But I had a girlfriend who was a very thin woman and she was fairly strong, and when we would wrestle around, she like had no strength. With one hand I could pin her. And it like dawned on me that if she were to be in any situation with someone stronger than her, and a lot of women who are that size, they have, they have nothing. They're totally defenseless.
>
> SUSANNAH: And I suspect that you have a lot more upper body strength than most women, and a lot of men.
>
> KAREN: Yeah.
>
> TINA: And it sounds like you have some history of anger, violence, et cetera, in your past and you sort of have some association. Where some people have never had any violence, I think that their first reaction would be [to be] fro-zen with fear . . .

In this interaction, Karen's experience is given one interpretation in her initial recounting, and then is collaboratively reframed to become something quite differ-ent. In the initial narrative, Karen uses a variety of construction tools including sto-rytelling, categorizing ("he didn't frighten me that much"), symbolizing ("that one particular guy" became a symbol of "all the violent acts and things that have oc-

curred to me in my life"), explaining ("all of the violent acts . . . I took out on that one guy") and forecasting ("I could have killed him," "I'm going to use everything I have"). There is also considerable use of emotion: Karen describes her own feelings during the assault ("very scary," "anger," "didn't frighten me") and the other women "emote together" when they respond with laughter, whistling, and "Go girl!"

But despite having constructed a sense of herself (and possibly by implication, other women as well) as powerful and competent in the face of a dangerous assault, this construction is challenged by others and indeed by Karen herself. The group does not discount Karen's story of successful resistance, but they reframe it, taking Karen's own lead, so that her resistance is not representative of all women. Again using a variety of construction tools, including categorizing ("a very thin woman," "a lot of women that size," "most women and a lot of men"), forecasting ("if she were to be in any situation with someone stronger"), the rhetorical strategy of maximizing ("totally defenseless"), and accounting ("you have some history of anger,") the group constructs this resistance as exceptional to Karen, preserving the dominant gender ideology that women are vulnerable to male danger. As evidenced above, a single statement can contain complex and often contradictory information, and it is possible for a person to reframe her/his own statement to fit established scripts of gendered vulnerability. Nevertheless, the construction of Karen's resistance as anomalous to, rather than representative of, women, is fundamentally an interactional accomplishment; the meaning of her story emerges only in the subsequent discussion.

Non-Response

At times, audiences neither support nor challenge a particular construction; they simply fail to respond to it. Of course, listeners may not have heard or understood what was said. Frequently, however, ignoring is more strategic: "Speakers may avoid taking up and dealing with what they perfectly well know is accomplished or implicated by prior talk so as to influence the direction of talk toward some desired objective" (Heritage 1984:260). Ignoring a contribution is one way of challenging it, disagreeing with it, or deemphasizing it (Drew 1992; Hollander 2002; Roth 1998). Because disagreement is interactionally dispreferred (Heritage), respondents may attempt to soften their challenge by hesitating, requesting clarification, or simply remaining silent (Pomerantz 1984). This kind of "damage control" is an attempt to forestall the negative interactional consequences of disagreement (Clayman 2001). In the excerpt below, for example, a group of women discuss their prospects of successfully escaping and resisting a violent attack:

> SUSANNAH: I basically don't ever want to be in a situation where a man is close enough to put his hands on me. Because I have that basic level of expectation that, it's a pretty rare instance that I would be stronger, or faster, so I don't want to be in range.
> MONA: So do you think you could escape a violent act?

SUSANNAH: Probably not. I mean, that's the thing, I'd rather be out of range.
LORNA: . . . I have no idea what I would do.
MONA: If there was a weapon involved?
LORNA: But I don't know.
MONA: I'd do most anything, I think.
ELLEN: Has anyone here been a victim of physical violence?

In this exchange, we again see tools such as categorizing, accounting, and forecasting. However, what is most notable here is Mona's forecast that she would do "most anything" to escape a violent situation. The previous speakers have suggested that they try to stay "out of range" because they do not expect they would be able to respond effectively to an assault. Mona's expectation is quite different: she would do anything to escape. Her quiet contribution is ignored by the group, however, which moves on to a discussion of experiences of victimization. Mona's comment does not fit in with other group members' statements, all of which express doubt about the possibility of escaping a violent situation. By ignoring her forecasted resistance to violence, the group preserves the construction of male strength and female vulnerability.

In other cases, ignoring may be a form of "tactful blindness": a deliberate failure to call attention to socially inappropriate elements of a particular construction. For example, Mason-Schrock (1996) describes how transsexual support group members overlooked those parts of each other's narratives that did not fit with their emerging identities as "true" transsexuals. Whether supportive or dismissive, the absence of reaction is a quiet but certainly not neutral way of assisting in the process of social construction.

In sum, whether they support, challenge, or ignore a particular construction, audience responses, and the social context more generally, are central to the process of meaning construction. As these examples make clear, meaning is not simply constructed by an individual utterance, but is negotiated through interaction. Thus, it is essential that social constructionists attend to the interactional processes of meaning construction in conversation, as well as the individual elements of these processes. In this way, even the most micro of interactions can serve as important lenses into the workings of large-scale social structures.

CONCLUSION

Despite the rapid adoption of social constructionist approaches in sociology and other disciplines, much theorizing about construction finesses the question of *how* social construction occurs. There has been far more attention paid to the *idea* that something is socially constructed than there has been to how, concretely, such a process might take place (Hacking 1999). In what social contexts and through what interactional processes do these constructions happen? Who participates in these processes? What determines whether a particular construction succeeds or fails? We contend that addressing these questions is essential for a complete theory of social construction.

Our contribution in this article is twofold. First, we have produced a typology of construction tools by reviewing and synthesizing a broad range of research and theory that addresses how meaning is constructed in talk. We do not claim that our typology is exhaustive; it focuses only on verbal interaction and therefore does not include other channels of communication, such as appearance, physical gestures, and the manipulation of objects. However, we feel confident that the nine tools we describe here are those that have been central to, though frequently implicit in, social constructionists' analyses of meaning construction in verbal interaction. Second, we have suggested that social constructionists should increase their attention to sequences of interaction, and have offered brief examples of three basic types of interactional processes—support, challenge, and non-response—through which meaning is constructed in conversation. Although individual contributions are essential to the processes of construction, it is through interaction and exchange that most construction takes place, and proposed constructions succeed or fail. Moreover, it is in interaction that resistance to particular constructions—and thus new constructions that may lead to social change—is possible. We believe that work from social constructionist perspectives must increase its attention to the interactional level in order to understand the struggle among competing constructions that underlies social change or, as important, the maintenance of the status quo.

This article has focused on the processes that occur in everyday, face-to-face situations, and, more specifically, those processes that occur in talk. Although this is our starting point, we want to emphasize that conversation is not the only place where social construction occurs. The discursive processes we have identified in conversation may also occur in other, more public, contexts, such as media, law, or politics. At a group level, conversational patterns—such as the patterns of interruptions and tag questions that Crawford (1995) describes—and formal and informal rules and expectations systematically shape interaction. Finally, at the structural level, social institutions and organizations are also an important part of social construction, as Acker (1990) has shown in her analysis of the gendered nature of organizations.

Moreover, we believe that the interactional and structural levels of analysis are not separable. For example, conversations like those described in this article are limited and shaped by cultural discourses. These discourses provide pre-existing tracks for conversations and experiences to follow; it is generally easier to follow these tracks than to go "off-road" and create new meanings. These discourses are not separable from social structure: "Discourses are socially and historically situated, and particular discourses support particular structures embodied in institutions" (Elvin-Nowak and Thomsson 2001:408). These discourses both influence, and are constituted by, what happens at the interactional level. Processes of talk contain the seeds and bear the imprints of large-scale social structures. Thus, the consequences generated by a particular sequence of conversation reverberate beyond the interactants themselves.

Another linkage between structure and interaction involves the issue of power. The success of any given construction is partly determined by the power and authority

of those who support it—and of those who contest it. Constructions supported by those in positions of power and authority are likely to be more successful (Goodwin 1994; Hollander 2002; Muehlenhard and Kimes 1999; Stolte, Fine, and Cook 2001; Thorne 1993). Individuals' locations in systems of hierarchy are therefore central to understanding how social construction evolves.

We hope this analysis will provoke further thinking about social construction. In particular, we look forward to advances on three fronts. First, we encourage more elaboration on the tools of construction. We have suggested nine tools that seem fundamental to conversation; future work could examine the relationships among these tools and explore the circumstances under which each tends to be used. In addition, scholars could expand the analysis beyond conversation to nonverbal channels of communication. An important question is the effectiveness of these tools: are some more powerful than others in successfully constructing meaning?

A second focus for future research is a fuller analysis of the role of interaction in construction. We have identified three broad interactional processes that occur in conversation: support, challenge, and non-response. Are there other important processes? What subcategories of each process can be identified? (For example, we noted a distinction between direct challenges and more subtle reframings.) Who uses which processes, and under what circumstances? And perhaps more importantly, how do these processes determine the success of a particular construction in conversation?

Finally, we hope that future projects will include attention to the linkages between interaction and social structure. For example, we believe it would be fruitful to study the structural positions of the interactants in a conversation, and their consequences for social construction. We also suggest further attention to the reciprocal relationship between conversation and cultural discourses: how do conversations draw on these discourses, and how do they contribute to them? How do large-scale social movements shift the environment, produce changes in discourses, and thus affect how constructions are built, modified, or resisted in interaction? As Schwalbe and his colleagues (2000) argued with regard to inequality, both micro and macro analysis are needed for a complete understanding of social structure: "Inequality cannot be understood apart from the processes that produce it. . . . The reproduction of inequality, even when it appears thoroughly institutionalized, ultimately depends on face-to-face interaction, which therefore must be studied as part of understanding the reproduction of inequality" (p. 420).

Each of these projects will increase our understanding of the processes of social construction: how social construction happens, under what circumstances, and with what consequences. We believe these steps are essential for a more complete theory of social construction. In addition, such understanding will provide an entry point for social change: if we better understand how social constructions are built in interaction, we are better equipped to reconstruct those that are damaging. We look forward to further work along these lines.

NOTES

1. Indeed, Maines (2001:228) argues that "the entire field of sociology has been a social constructionist one for most of the twentieth century insofar as practicing sociologists look directly at social processes to find their explanations for societal configurations and arrangements."
2. Some writers do attend to the details of interaction; see, for example, Gilmore and Crissman (1997), Staske (1996), Miller (1989), and Rohlfing (1997).
3. A few authors addressed this issue directly. In most cases, however, we had to extrapolate from the author's discussion. Our analysis represents our best attempt to understand the authors' intent.
4. It could be argued that focus groups do not produce "natural" conversations, because they are artificially formed for the researcher's purposes. However, the distinction between "natural" talk found in everyday conversation and the "artificial" talk of focus groups is unclear, especially when the focus group discussion is directed by the participants themselves. Everyday interaction involves conversation with strangers as well as acquaintances and intimates, and is undertaken for a variety of reasons. Both types of talk involve social interaction and take place in social contexts, where people attend to the demands of status expectations, power differences, conversational norms, and self-presentation concerns (Hollander 2004). Moreover, speakers use the tools we describe in this article in both types of talk. Thus focus group conversations and "everyday" conversations are simply different types of verbal interactions; one is not more "natural" than the other.
5. All participant names used in this article are pseudonyms; other identifying details have also been changed in order to ensure confidentiality. Quotes have been edited for readability but are otherwise transcribed verbatim from audio tapes of the focus group discussions.

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