

# Evaluating the Social Constructionist Paradigm in Housing Research

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This article considers the contribution of “social constructionist” research to housing studies. The first part of the paper discusses “positivist” epistemologies that have provided an implicit foundation for the majority of housing research. It then examines the philosophical suppositions that underpin “social constructionism”. This is followed by a summary of the major criticisms that can be levelled against the new research agenda, alongside a review of recent examples of housing research that draw upon social constructionism. Finally, the paper considers the future of theoretical housing research and speculates as to what can be achieved by methods based upon a social constructionist epistemology.

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## INTRODUCTION: THE FABIAN LEGACY

Writing almost thirty years ago, Pinker (1971) commented that social policy as a subject “has developed an impressive empirical tradition while lacking any substantial body of explanatory theory” (1971:xii). Since Pinker’s observation, much has changed and nowadays nearly all policy debates have engaged with the theoretical concerns within social science. However, while there are exceptions, Pinker’s observation still holds true for much of the corpus of housing research. Indeed, for many academics, studies are undertaken primarily to improve policy practice, the expectation being that new research can inform policy makers in their efforts to resolve social problems. This paradigm exerts enormous influence; for example, large funding institutions, such as the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, commission projects which are viewed as likely to have an immediate bearing on service delivery. Furthermore, although the absence of *explicit* theory remains a defining characteristic of mainstream housing research, it primarily relies upon a positivist epistemology. Within this paradigm, the task of the housing researcher is one of discovering objective facts, presenting them in a descriptive format in the expectation that policy makers will take notice and act accordingly.

Though research within the empirical tradition achieves a level of sophistication in its analysis of social phenomena, its primary purposes are to establish facts and to prescribe effective action once problems

are acknowledged. Not surprisingly, the conceptual categories used in housing research are rarely scrutinised within this paradigm; instead they rely upon the collection of material evidence to reinforce policy recommendations. It would be erroneous to deny the benefits that ensue from such a view of housing research. Policy-oriented research enables academics to access resources and to ensure scholarship is up-to-date and close to the practical concerns of policy makers. However, there are disadvantages to such an integral connection with a practitioners’ agenda. The resulting research product is often methodologically conservative. In addition, it is difficult to pursue new lines of investigation or, for that matter, to develop different conceptualisations of the policy process. Perhaps the most serious problem is that research of this kind is generally reactive to the professional housing lobby, which limits its opportunities to pursue a critical line of enquiry. Consequently, the positivist paradigm has had an impact on the *modus operandi* of housing research. Debates tend to be conducted within an agenda dominated by two competing ideologies: either policies should be formulated to bolster market mechanisms, or the role of the state should be extended. Additionally, funding institutions tend to be dismissive of commissioning work that is not policy-driven, and therefore opportunities for housing researchers to engage in explicitly theoretical work are severely limited (Kemeny, 1992; Clapham, 1997).

A reliance on positivism can be traced back to the influential Fabian agenda that has dominated the study

of social administration in the UK. Fabianism was developed as an attempt to apply a rigorous approach to the study of social problems. The application of empirically testable methods was seen as crucial to the validity of research. The ultimate objectives were to influence policy makers and to encourage government agencies to take action. It should be acknowledged that Fabian-inspired research has achieved success in this respect. Researchers based at institutions such as the London School of Economics have been able to influence the policy agendas of a number of post-war administrations. For example, writers such as Titmuss (1950), Abel-Smith and Townsend (1965), Pinker (1975) and Townsend (1979) exercised a considerable intellectual and practical influence upon the development of government social policy between the late 1940s and the 1970s. The advent of neo-liberal Conservative administrations appeared to limit the growth of Fabianism, but since the 1997 British General Election, it has re-emerged as a major influence on government policy. For example, academics such as Le Grand (1997), Glennerster (1998), Hills (1998) and Power (1999) have had considerable influence on recent government policies aimed at tackling social exclusion.

#### SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONIST EPISTEMOLOGY

The re-emergence of research drawing upon social constructionist epistemologies marks an attempt to broaden the scope of housing studies. More and more contributions have begun to make use of the methodological insights offered by explanations rooted in constructionism. During the last few years several studies (for example: Hastings, 1996; Sahlin, 1996; Allen, 1997; Clapham, 1997; Clapham and Franklin, 1997; Gurney, 1999b; Haworth and Manzi, 1999; Jacobs, 1999; Jacobs et al., 1999) have sought to draw upon a social constructionist epistemology to advance alternative interpretations of housing policy and practice.

A constructionist epistemology purports that an individual's experience is an active process of interpretation rather than a passive material apprehension of an external physical world. A major claim advanced by those adopting a social constructionist epistemology is that actors do not merely provide descriptions of events, but are themselves constitutive of wider policy discourses and conflicts. Viewing society and social policy as malleable and subject to power struggles, constructionists do not accept social facts as permanently "accomplished". This emphasis on contestation is important in offsetting any tendency by actors to objectify social phenomena or reify abstractions into material realities. Using a social constructionist

approach we must be sensitive to this tendency by individuals and avoid falling into the trap of treating their accounts as concrete realities or material truths.

Social constructionism therefore offers an altogether different conception of reality from the one advanced by positivism, as well as a basis from which to understand the contexts and processes of housing. A common thread that links all work that draws upon social constructionism is the importance it attaches to reflexivity. In particular such research emphasises the need to acknowledge both the importance of "subjectivity" and how the act of research entails selection and pre-conceived idealisations, which, in turn, influence the research agenda. This commitment to reflexivity has begun to have a wider impact: there are signs that researchers are beginning to be more explicit about their research methods (see, for example, Beck et al., 1994).

#### *The philosophical basis of social constructionism*

Social constructionism as an epistemology has its genesis in a number of theoretical developments. Within traditional philosophy, approaches influenced by the work of the later Wittgenstein have been important in discussions of epistemology (Winch, 1958; Wittgenstein, 1976). Within the sociological tradition, symbolic interactionism (Berger and Luckman, 1966; Schutz, 1967; Strauss, 1978) and ethnography (Geertz, 1993) have been important influences. Each of these approaches (albeit in different ways) has been concerned with those aspects of our understanding that are influenced by subjective experience and how these experiences are mediated.

A writer who has exercised a strong influence upon those sympathetic to a constructionist epistemology is Michel Foucault (1980). Foucault's interest in language is important primarily for its focus on social relations, identity and acquisition of knowledge. The application of a Foucauldian framework is particularly useful for the study of organisational change. Rather than viewing organisations as hierarchies in which the exercise of power is linear, Foucault's analysis hinges on a "relational" process in which power is viewed as interdependent within a complex network of structures and organisational dynamics. Strategies to maintain control thus involve a diverse set of processes, including explicit and implicit methods. Hence, discourses and rhetoric are effective tools to exert dominance. As Foucault maintains:

Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power. (Foucault, 1980:98)

Although encompassing a wide range of theoretical work, constructionist approaches generally entail a questioning of “common-sense” or “taken-for-granted” explanations of reality. For social constructionism, observation is an active process that takes place within the realm of language. Hence, “whatever does exist we can only know by way of our constituting it through discourse” (Grint, 1995:8). Discourse and language are therefore centrally important in understanding how we perceive and make sense of the social world.

For social science, constructionist epistemology has radical implications for the conduct of research. What constitutes “knowledge” is dependent upon definitional concepts and categories established by researchers. Constructionist frameworks have influenced a wide range of sociological theories from the 1960s onwards, beginning with discussions of the collective definition of subjects (Blumer, 1969, 1971). Competing interpretations of social “problems” such as “deviance” became an important area of debate, for example, in “labelling” theories (Wilkins, 1964; Becker, 1966; Cohen, 1972; Mauss, 1975; Spector and Kitsuse, 1977). The ability of the media to “manufacture” anxieties about crime levels was an important source of social analysis (Chibnall, 1977; Fishman, 1978; Cohen and Young, 1981). As a source of topical debate, the journal *Social Problems* illustrates the widespread influence constructionism has attained within social theory. Constructionist critiques have played an important role within a number of disciplines. For example, social psychology (Elias, 1978; Shotter, 1984; Gergen, 1985; Strauss, 1989) and political science (Edelman, 1964, 1977, 1988; Dryzek and Leonard, 1988; Saxonhouse, 1993) have benefited from post-empirical, post-positivist analyses. Constructionism has also been applied (albeit controversially) to the philosophy of the natural sciences (Latour and Woolgar, 1986; Woolgar, 1988).

Important goals of constructionist research are therefore to examine how certain issues become defined as “problems” and to identify the collective strategies developed to confront these issues. Within a housing context, Kemeny has argued (1984, 1988, 1992) that what becomes a “problem” is, to a considerable extent, contingent on how interest groups compete with each other to gain acceptance of a particular definition while rejecting others. In this respect problems are constructed, as policy makers attempt to establish their policy agendas in response to changing economic and social conditions and in accordance with their own needs.

The constructionist perspective is thus very different to those approaches within the traditional corpus of housing studies that maintain that problems reflect underlying social realities. Three examples illustrate

the contribution offered by a constructionist analysis. First, the concept of “homelessness” may be viewed on one level as primarily an issue relating to limited supply and excessive demand. From a constructionist perspective, in contrast, the dynamic aspects of “homelessness” are highlighted, with a particular focus on how definitions change over time depending on the relative power of interest groups to impose their agendas on the policy community (Jacobs et al., 1999).

A second example of the value of constructionism can be found in attempts to attribute causes of rent arrears. Thus, in recent years, the issue of housing debt has come to be understood less as a symptom of poverty and deficient income than as deliberate unwillingness to pay rent (Hunter and Nixon, 1999). This redefinition of the problem has taken place despite attempts by pressure groups to encourage government to undertake more holistic approaches to poverty and debt. Consequently, the limited measures now adopted by government reflect the weakness of pressure groups to influence the political agenda or to define individual debt as a social “problem” meriting substantive policy intervention. Similarly, the erosion of housing allowances to claimants when interest groups have been unable to protect their entitlements can be contrasted with the electoral success of political parties who campaign for tight controls on spending. An example of housing policy within a Swedish context is provided in Sahlin’s (1995) discussion of resident exclusion, which examines the strategies landlords exercise to perform a gatekeeping function and to maintain discipline amongst residents.

To see housing policies as the outcomes of competing claims can help us to understand why so many policies are often contradictory and rarely directed towards consistent and unified aims. This perspective also establishes a link between housing problems and decisions in other areas of social and economic policy. However, in order to evaluate the contribution of constructionism, we need to consider some of the various criticisms levelled at this epistemology.

#### *Criticisms of social constructionism.*

The criticisms most often levelled against constructionism are threefold. First, constructionist analysis dispenses with any notion of “objective” truth or fact (the implication being that all claims are equally relevant). Second, constructionism privileges agency over and above structure. Third, the use of social constructionist epistemologies promotes a form of academic writing that is gratuitously obscure and difficult to disseminate.

*Relativism.* It is argued that in postulating a relativist account of reality, social constructionists are unable to

discern between competing claims. Whose version of events is accurate? How do we adjudicate between rival interpretations or competing claims? The accusation that social constructionism leads to relativism has led some writers to attack this epistemology in its crudest form as unsustainable. For example, Collin (1997) has asserted that the “broad” arguments for constructionism are reliant upon a notion of truth as convention or communal consensus. Hence:

There is no way we can sustain something remotely resembling our customary picture of the social world. As a matter of fact, social reality disappears altogether. (1997:99)

For critics such as Collin, a radical constructionist position leads to an infinite regress: “there is nothing that can be determinately asserted about social reality” (*ibid.*:97: see also Burr, 1998 for a similar criticism). A more cautious 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. In making such a distinction, constructionism can avoid endorsing an extremist idealist epistemology that claims that the material world itself is contingent *solely* on our perception. For writers such as Collin, the insights of constructionism can only survive through such a qualified approach. The conclusion is that

Social facts essentially involve human thought (or “meaning”) as a *component* or an *aspect*, which implies that human thought generates social fact by being a part of it. (Collin, 1997:219, emphasis in original)

Hence, constructionism can be rescued from accusations of extreme reductionism by acknowledging that whilst “reality” is comprised of social activity, mediated through language, this is not an entirely arbitrary matter. Social facts are thus not simply dependent upon convention or individual choice, but exist within a context of social institutions and agreed reactions.

*Privileging of agency.* Another criticism levelled against social constructionism is that it privileges individual agency at the expense of wider structural and institutional concerns. The focus on a subjective viewpoint overemphasises the significance of individual volition in shaping political change and downplays how both institutional rules and resources impact upon individual action. In short, social constructionism, it is argued, overlooks the material and practical

constraints that curb an individual’s capacity to affect change. Constructionism thus privileges individual experiences over and above structural features. It is sometimes argued to be a “micro”, subjective theory ignoring the wider “macro” picture (Sabatier, 1999). In an attempt to overcome this criticism, some writers (for example, Jacobs, 1999) who deploy a social constructionist approach have made use of Giddens’ (1984) theory of “structuration”. Giddens employs both agency and structuralist explanations to argue that individual action, while constrained by wider social processes, is also generative of these broader structures.

*Excessive abstractionism.* A final criticism levelled at constructionism is that it is gratuitously intellectual. This is often a claim levelled by practitioners who are puzzled by what seems to be a narrow and arcane preoccupation with abstract concepts. From their perspective, housing “theory” is of dubious value and a distraction from what they perceive is the core function of housing research. However, as we have argued, since all research contains implicit underlying epistemological assumptions, it is important to make these explicit so that research can be properly evaluated and understood. In addition, theory has a role in highlighting the ideological assumptions that inform housing research and establishing the political context in which research is undertaken.<sup>1</sup>

#### *Countering criticisms of social constructionism*

Perhaps the best way to counter criticisms made against social constructionist approaches is to outline some recent examples of housing research using this epistemology. The studies can be divided into three different strands: the social construction of organisations, criticisms of contemporary policy initiatives and conceptual clarification.

*The social construction of organisations.* A social constructionist epistemology is particularly useful for exploring organisational conflicts and tensions. Its merit is its recognition that within organisations, staff do not share a single view of reality; instead, organisations are viewed as multiple sites of conflict in which different actors vie with each other for control. In contrast to the rhetorical strategies deployed by management to secure strategic objectives, a social constructionist research agenda is committed to seeking out the tensions underlying this rhetoric and exploring competing interpretations.

A considerable body of work has developed on the

<sup>1</sup> Here our arguments draw upon the work of Dunleavy (1980:21–22).

social construction of management (see, for example, Grint, 1995). Debates about the “culture” of organisations have made use of these interpretive and ethno-methodological arguments to develop research into hidden meanings, symbols and underlying conflicts within organisations (Morgan, 1988). Other theoretical developments, while not explicitly drawing upon constructionist literature, can also be seen to draw upon hermeneutic perspectives. For example, discussion of “new institutionalism” (Powell and Di Maggio, 1991) or the use of “grid-group cultural theory” (Douglas, 1987; Ellis and Thompson, 1997; Hood, 1998) are attempts to explore issues of organisational change using interpretive methods. These studies aim to explain the social construction of institutions and how issues of organisational change are imbued with conflict and power struggles.

An example of the application of housing research within a constructionist framework is found in the work of Clapham and Franklin (1997), who present some illustrations of the difficulties of agreeing upon definitions of housing management. In a qualitative study of housing managers, the authors explore the extent to which staff are able to define their own roles, and how other professions (namely social workers) influence perceptions of housing management. Clapham and Franklin draw upon the work of Strauss (1978), making particular use of his notion of “negotiated order”. Strauss’s key insight is that our understanding of social reality is often contingent on the reconciliation of competing interpretations. Hence, Clapham and Franklin assert that housing staff resort to “negotiating, bargaining and boundary maintenance behaviour” (1997:12) in defining their work. This dynamic, though it enables managers to exercise considerable autonomy, may in the longer term undermine the claims of housing management to professionalism, since more established rules and boundaries must be in place. The merit of Franklin and Clapham’s research is that it brings to the fore the power conflicts between professions and the practice of housing management as perceived by key actors. Their attention to group interaction and negotiations provides us with useful knowledge of the activities that take place within the housing policy community.

Clapham (1997) further develops the constructionist organisational paradigm in a literature review of recent research on attempts to enhance the performance of housing management staff. Clapham suggests that much of this research is prescriptive in so far as it seeks to improve performance. One consequence is that research on housing management has overlooked the social and political context in which management is situated. In particular, the impact of poverty and the process of residualisation on housing provision have

been neglected. Clapham’s main concern is to explore how ideas of surveillance have had an impact on the ethos of housing management. He charts how housing managers have in recent years been expected to engage in practices that address “anti-social behaviour” largely in response to rising concerns about lawlessness and social exclusion. Drawing upon the work of Foucault (1977), Clapham argues that surveillance has become one of the most significant modes of action through which power is exercised. The installation of CCTV (close circuit television) on housing estates and the advent of new legal powers to enforce “good behaviour” have an important impact on power relations between tenants and landlords, as well as on attitudes to social housing more widely.

*Criticisms of contemporary policy initiatives.* Several critical research studies examining the impact of contemporary policy initiatives have made use of constructionist epistemologies. Three examples are considered in this section. First, in an analysis of “partnership” arrangements within urban regeneration initiatives, Hastings (1996) questions the assumptions contained within the notion of collaborative working. She illustrates how this concept is dependent on the premise of equal power relationships, an assumption rarely justified in an environment dominated by political conflict and competitive mechanisms.

Secondly, Allen (1997) has explored organisational conflicts in community care policy. He advances a tripartite investigation, which entails the “multi-levels of the policy sector, the linkages between them and the manner in which they interact in order to produce and transform policy materials” (1997:90). Applying this methodology to an examination of how policies have been enacted by housing practitioners, Allen investigates the constructions that influence the practice of “community care”, particularly the influence of new right ideology. He also suggests that although at a rhetorical level, policies in this area purport to meet specific needs, much of the practice of community care has reinforced traditional modes of working, albeit in the context of the home.

A third example of the constructionist agenda can be found in the work of Jacobs (1999). His research, which explores the political conflicts within a large urban regeneration initiative in north-east London, concentrates on examining the power struggles involving different agencies attempting to shape the policy agenda in accordance with their own needs. Utilising the methodological writings of Giddens (1984) and Kemeny (1988, 1992), the analysis focuses on those areas of housing practice where the most acute power conflicts take place. Since these struggles find expression and are actualised through language, it is the

discursive practices and elicitation of meanings derived from actors' accounts that form the basis of an exploration of housing policy change.

*Clarifying conceptual distinctions.* Implicit in the above examples is the notion that constructionism has an important role in clarifying and elucidating conceptual distinctions used within housing policy. A good example of how these distinctions are "essentially contested" (Edelman, 1988) is provided by the debate about housing tenure. Earlier discussions had questioned this concept without making explicit reference to constructionism (for example, Barlow and Duncan, 1988). A more recent attempt to explain tenure as "prejudicial" is provided in Somerville (1997) and in Gurney's (1999a) discussion on concepts of the "home". Deploying ethnographic methods, Gurney draws upon Foucault to show how notions of home ownership have been "normalised" within British culture. Gurney's argument is that it is this form of tenure more than any other that has become associated with "evocative and emotional ideas of the home, so that it becomes normal for a preference for home ownership to be constructed as an act of human nature" (1999a:179). Gurney argues that the accentuation of the positive attributes of home ownership contrasts sharply with negative associations that surround social housing. In policy terms, the cultural norms associated with home ownership impact detrimentally on efforts by the local state to tackle social exclusion. The importance of Gurney's paper is that he shows how terms like "home" have multiple meanings. It is both a descriptive term, but also, more importantly, has a symbolic purpose that impacts upon the attitudes and activities of all social groups.

Similarly, a subsequent discussion that makes use of metaphor and myth (Gurney, 1999b) succeeds in questioning the basis for assumptions about owner-occupation in the UK. Constructionist analysis can therefore help to interrogate and clarify the assumptions contained within convenient labels about tenure.

#### *The future for social constructionist research methods*

It is important not to fall into the trap of promoting social constructionism as the only coherent approach in housing research. Social constructionism is best seen as appropriate to certain specific methodologies, for example, discourse analysis,<sup>2</sup> textual investigation and ethnographic research. In what other areas can a social constructionist approach be usefully applied? Clearly there are possibilities for wider sociological

investigations into housing organisations themselves. For example, studies could be undertaken on the budgetary processes by which senior professionals attempt to steer resources along particular trajectories. Such research could explore why certain strategies are adopted that may be inimical to individual and organisational interests.

Additionally, social constructionist epistemologies can usefully contribute their focus on how organisations choose to market themselves and their policies. The presentation of strategies to staff within an organisation and how housing agencies represent themselves are areas of research that would benefit from interpretive approaches. Such a theoretical framework can allow more detailed explorations of why specific decisions are made instead of others, and elucidate the negotiations and struggles conducted in reaching particular outcomes (see Jacobs and Manzi, 2000).

Finally, the impact of the "marketisation" (Hutton, 1995) of public sector housing institutions would benefit from further examination. While commentators (for example, Le Grand, 1990; Walsh, 1995; Reid, 1999) have focussed on the impact in terms of service delivery, more work is needed to describe the wider significance of these changes. For example, to what extent has a focus on "need" been supplanted by a concern with resource efficiency? Social constructionist research, with its focus on power, conflicts and "problem" construction, can shed light on the links between ideology and social and economic change.

#### CONCLUSION: THE PRACTICAL VALUE OF SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

The objective of those researchers who draw upon social constructionist epistemologies is not to undermine positivist methods of research, which have proved invaluable to practitioners and policy makers. Rather, social constructionism improves understanding of the complexities of policy as informed by empirical research. Thus, whilst there has been a tendency to see social constructionist epistemology as being entirely separate from the concerns of housing practitioners, it can, if used appropriately, provide a way to disentangle complex organisational processes. It may also help to elucidate the range of meanings implicit in the everyday practice of housing professionals. It may assist in a critical evaluation of contemporary initiatives and can help to disentangle some of the rhetoric now being used by housing professionals and politicians. Terms such as "social exclusion", "residualisation" and "marginalisation" are now used in everyday discourse, but clearly further work is required to draw out the broader significance of these terms for housing practice. It is

<sup>2</sup> We do not examine discourse analysis in any detail in this paper, as this will be discussed by Hastings in a forthcoming issue.

the task of researchers to investigate these concepts and to explore their implications for individuals and groups. A constructionist epistemology therefore offers a theoretical foundation that can enable housing researchers to extend the parameters of academic enquiry. While methods of research based upon social constructionist epistemologies are not appropriate for all aspects of housing research, they are most useful in providing a basis for enquiries that seek to interpret the subjective views of actors in the policy process and to clarify the concepts used by housing practitioners. They allow the researcher to mount an effective critique of contemporary policy initiatives.

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