

1 / What Is Social Constructionism?

Few terms in social theory ignite controversy like the term “social constructionism.”¹ While embraced as a creed by scholars working throughout the human sciences, it is also the focus of some of the most passionate criticism one is likely to find in the academy. Some of this criticism is levied from outside the social sciences and is based largely on caricature and misunderstanding (Gross and Levitt 1994; Sokal and Bricmont 1998). But much of it also comes from social scientists who fear that social constructionism threatens the very foundations of their craft (Boudon 2004). I do not share this fear, and in this book I seek to put it to rest. Indeed, I argue not only that it poses no threat to the social sciences but that a commitment to some form of social constructionism is an indispensable feature of all social scientific research. It is only when things are socially constructed that they are amenable to social scientific analysis. Hence, the question we should be asking is not the categorical: Are we or are we not constructionists? It is one of degree: Are there any aspects of our lives that must inevitably fall beyond the reach of social scientific understanding? I argue that social constructionists are best understood as those least willing to forsake the promise of the social sciences and, therefore, most dedicated to extending their reach into domains wherein they have hitherto been discounted. Social constructionism thus en-

tails cultivating an assiduous and intrepid sociological regard for *all* aspects of the human condition and for the many forms of knowledge that have emerged concerning them (including, of course, those produced by social scientists themselves).

Quite obviously, this is a partisan definition in a contested theoretical field. While few would dispute the claim that much of what has passed for social constructionism has in some sense been concerned with the sociology of knowledge, there is a wide range of opinion about what “knowledge” ought to mean in this context. Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, for example, clearly intended their classic text *The Social Construction of Reality* (1967) as a contribution to the sociology of knowledge,² but the knowledge they sought to analyze was, following Alfred Schutz, the common-sense knowledge of lay members of society rather than philosophically or scientifically validated knowledge. They specifically avoided problematizing the epistemic standards by which competing claims to knowledge are judged.³ Likewise, many constructionist researchers focus on news programming and other products of the mass media but very rarely explicitly attend to their epistemic merits, except sometimes to summarily discount them by way of uncritical contrasts with received scientific wisdom (Woolgar and Pawluch 1985). This research certainly yields important insights, but because it neglects epistemic questions, contributes little to our understanding of knowledge as such. To my mind, many of social constructionism’s most original and important contributions to the human sciences stem from its unyieldingly empirical investigations of what counts as genuine knowledge and why. Therefore, many of the themes I emphasize in this book highlight how social constructionism has contributed to our understanding of what knowledge is and the comparative value of the social sciences for illuminating knowledge as an empirically observable and researchable phenomenon rather than a merely imagined normative ideal.

This chapter addresses the question of what social constructionism is. It is less concerned with defending a definition than with providing a synoptic catalogue of the research that has contributed most to the establishment and development of social constructionism in the social sciences. The chapter is divided into five parts. I first trace the multiple origins of social constructionist thought, paying particular

attention to Marxian ideology critique and, more broadly, to what is often called the sociology of error. I note the more prominent debates and challenges that emerged among early social constructionists who sought to show the social forces governing the ideas of others without thereby undermining their own claim to intellectual authority. In the second part, I consider the contributions of the “strong program” in the sociology of scientific knowledge. Emphasis is given to the consequences of adopting the “principle of symmetry,” or the principle that both true and false beliefs must be explained in the same way. The third part addresses the so-called practice turn. Here I consider the main sources and key ideas of those who advocate an understanding of knowledge as competent performance rather than as beliefs or propositions that mirror things in themselves. In the fourth part, I discuss the concept of reflexivity, considering the value of explaining our own research practices sociologically. I conclude with a brief statement of what I take to be the distinctive virtues of the social constructionist approach. This statement serves as a platform for elaboration in later chapters.

The Roots of Social Constructionism

It is all too common in writings on the origins of social constructionism to rest content with a tracing of the phrase itself back to certain landmark texts such as Berger and Luckmann’s *The Social Construction of Reality* (1967) or Malcolm Spector and John Kitsuse’s (1987) *Constructing Social Problems*. Without discounting the importance of these texts, I would contend that it is deeply misleading to conflate the term “social construction” (or any other term) with the concept(s) it is meant to capture (Skinner 1989). As Michael Lynch (1998, 29) notes, since its introduction into the social scientific lexicon, the term “social construction” has been adopted by “diverse constituencies . . . for different reasons.” These constituencies have put the term to a wide variety of uses, many of which are plainly incompatible (Harris 2010). Most of these constituencies also have intellectual roots that go considerably deeper than the trendy terms in which they sometimes express their views. Much more important than tracing the roots of the term “social construction” itself, then, is

tracing the roots of the various intellectual movements within which this term has found a home.

Nowadays, using the term “social construction” is usually meant to convey that something that has been widely considered beyond the scope of social influence is actually the product of specific sociohistorical or social interactional processes. Hence, social constructionism thrives particularly vigorously among social scientists interested in the study of such matters as beauty, gender, morality, pathology, race, science, and sexuality. Whereas it was once widely believed that these phenomena were determined by fixed natural or metaphysical laws and therefore were sociohistorically invariant, social constructionists have repeatedly demonstrated the extent to which their characteristics are, in fact, culturally relative or historically specific. The conceptual resources with which such demonstrations are achieved hail from a wide variety of theoretical traditions both within and beyond the social sciences (Holstein and Gubrium 2008). But for present purposes, it is useful to begin with the three most prominent founders of the modern social sciences: Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Karl Marx. Each of these writers set major precedents for social constructionist social science.

Despite his common association with positivism, Durkheim has greatly influenced social constructionist research through his later thought, as exhibited, for example, in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1954) and *Primitive Classification* (1963). In these writings, Durkheim argued that systems of classification reflect the social organization of the societies in which they occur. Although it may be debated whether he was referring to “knowledge” in the conventional sense, his influence can be seen in the work of various important twentieth-century anthropologists, such as Edward Evans-Pritchard, who articulated and effectively promoted a culturally relativist sociology of knowledge (Douglas 1980). This turn toward classification and the sociology of knowledge in anthropology provided an important precedent for a diverse assortment of writers, including Pierre Bourdieu, Mary Douglas, Peter Winch, and Michel Foucault, who in their turn also have become important figures in the constructionist canon. A more direct Durkheimian influence can also be seen in the work of David Bloor and other contributors to the “strong program”

in the sociology of knowledge (Bloor 1982), about whom I have more to say below.⁴

Because social constructionists tend to stress the diverse meanings social actors confer on their experiences, Weber's role in legitimating and popularizing *Verstehen* sociology must be acknowledged as an important precedent. Weber's thoughts on *Verstehen* reflect the influences of a variety of earlier writers associated with German idealism, including such patriarchs of the constructionist tradition as Immanuel Kant, Wilhelm Dilthey, and Friedrich Nietzsche. Although the specifics of Weber's reflections on social action, rationality, and knowledge are rarely given explicit coverage in constructionist texts, he must nonetheless be credited with helping to create a space wherein subjective meaning could be considered a legitimate topic of study for social science. Were it not for Weber's influence, the social sciences might well have provided far less fertile soil for social constructionist cultivation than in fact has been the case. More concretely, Weber's writings on ideal types, meaning, values, and rationalization also exercised a variety of specific influences on other seminal contributors to the constructionist canon, including Alfred Schutz, Karl Mannheim, members of the Frankfurt School, and Jürgen Habermas.

Among the classical theorists, it is Marx who has had the greatest impact on social constructionism by way of his writings on ideology. Marx developed this concept to suggest how people can suffer from a false consciousness that renders them complicit in their own oppression. This idea was developed by later Marxists, such as Georg Lukacs and Antonio Gramsci, whose elaborations on concepts such as class consciousness, reification, and hegemony have greatly influenced social constructionist research by linking the putative legitimacy of ideas to the interests of actors who are sufficiently powerful to influence the standards by which their legitimacy is measured. This linkage of what societies regard as valid knowledge to the power structures that make up those societies has remained a lively and fruitful enterprise. Beyond its Marxian roots, the linkage of power and knowledge can be seen in social constructionist research stemming from the postcolonial traditions of, for example, Edward Said; Stuart Hall and the Birmingham School of cultural studies; Foucault's studies of power/knowledge; Bourdieu's studies of symbolic violence;

the feminist standpoint theories of Dorothy Smith and others; and, of course, Howard Becker's, Edwin Lemert's, and Erving Goffman's studies of labeling.

Transforming the Marxian critical concept of ideology into a general and non-critical concept of knowledge as such, Mannheim (1936) called for the sociological analysis of all knowledge (except natural science) as socially embedded and constructed. This was, of course, a monumental precedent for social constructionism, but it tended to undermine the possibility of critiquing knowledge claims by leveling the epistemological ground between critic and the object of critique. Mannheim's sociology of knowledge therefore was looked upon by his Marxist contemporaries with considerable suspicion. Indeed, it has been precisely this difficulty of reconciling the sociology of knowledge (which seeks to explain ideas with reference to their social contexts) with epistemology (which seeks to establish procedures for validating ideas) that, since Mannheim, has continued to provoke the most passionate debate among social constructionists and their critics (Hacking 1999; Hollis and Lukes 1982; Wilson 1970). Mannheim (1936, 155) sought to achieve this reconciliation by both exempting the natural sciences from his purview and arguing that a "socially unattached intelligentsia" might succeed in overcoming the biases inherent in their original class positions. However, he gave no real account of how they could do so and has been taken to task by critics for ducking the problem more than truly resolving it (Merton 1937; von Schelting 1936).

Berger and Luckmann (1967, 13) also exempted the natural sciences from their analysis. And rather than seek to resolve the tension with epistemology, they simply declared it beyond the scope of the sociology of knowledge: "To include epistemological questions concerning the validity of sociological knowledge in the sociology of knowledge is somewhat like trying to push a bus in which one is riding. . . . Far be it from us to brush aside such questions. All we would contend here is that these questions are not themselves part of the empirical discipline of sociology. They properly belong to the methodology of the social sciences, an enterprise that belongs to philosophy and is by definition other than sociology."

Like Berger and Luckmann, most social constructionists have sought to avoid direct confrontations with either the natural sciences

or formal epistemology. Hence, it has been common to distinguish between the natural and social dimensions of studied phenomena and confine attention to the social construction of the latter (as when feminist scholars distinguished between biologically determined *sex* and socially constructed *gender*, or when medical sociologists distinguished between biologically determined *disease* and socially constructed *illness experience* or *disability*). Likewise, most constructionists have passed the buck when it comes to dealing with the difficult question of distinguishing truth and falsity—or, for that matter, establishing any technique for arbitrating the intellectual value of competing claims—once the presumption to possess universal epistemological criteria has been abandoned. They instead rely implicitly on the epistemic standards of their own respective disciplines, or subdisciplines, to assert the legitimate authority of their own ideas and sociologically reductionist accounts of the ideas of those they study. The result is that most social constructionists have been forced to choose between an unsustainably parochial relativism and what Bloor (1991, 12) called the sociology of error. More precisely, they have had either to advocate a permanent suspension of questions concerning the comparative merit of their own ideas and those they study or dogmatically insist that their own ideas are epistemologically sound and those they study amount to mere myths and illusions. In any case, most social constructionists have remained studiously silent on the question of how we might more reasonably, justly, compassionately, or systematically arbitrate the intellectual value of competing claims. It is this silence that most consistently has infuriated critics.

Social constructionism has also drawn a great deal from the legacy of what is often called micro-sociology. For the most part this work stems from the American pragmatist tradition inaugurated by people like Charles Pierce, William James, John Dewey, and George Herbert Mead. In contrast to many of their European predecessors, the pragmatists tended to emphasize creative agency over structurally deterministic explanations of social events and to highlight how social order can be a product of egalitarian negotiation rather than exploitation and domination. Central to this theoretical program was the tenet that human experience of the world is always mediated by the socially inherited meanings actors actively confer on it. The Chicago School

of sociology enthusiastically embraced this tenet, as can be seen in W. I. Thomas's famous theorem "If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences" (Thomas and Thomas 1928, 572). The turn away from structural determinism toward a focus on the situated negotiation of meaning was codified by Herbert Blumer (1969) into what he christened symbolic interactionism. Long before Berger and Luckmann published *The Social Construction of Reality*, symbolic interactionists took it as axiomatic that whatever grasp people have of the world is inevitably mediated by socially constructed symbolic devices. Through labeling theory and, later, the "social worlds" perspective first outlined by Anselm Straus, Tomatsu Shibutani, and Howard Becker, symbolic interactionists have made major contributions to the constructionist canon (Clarke 1990; Star 1989; Wiener 1981).

However, it was not until the advent of ethnomethodology in the 1960s that critical attention was given to questions of epistemology as such. Harold Garfinkel and Harvey Sacks (1970) notoriously recommended a policy of indifference to received sociological wisdom in studies of the routine production of social order. Sociology thus was placed on an epistemological par with all other forms of practical reasoning (including water witching). The presumption that epistemology might somehow facilitate the transcendence of our ordinary practical reasoning skills was abandoned in favor of a radically empirical approach to the study of what Melvin Pollner (1987) has called mundane reason—not the normative ideal of Reason valorized in the academy, but the actual, empirically observable ways in which people organize judgments of rationality and competence as they go about their everyday lives. Beginning in the late 1970s, this approach was trained directly on the research practices of natural scientists and mathematicians, thus making even more explicit the anti-epistemological ambitions implicit in Garfinkel's program.⁵ Although its relation to social constructionism has sometimes been contested (Button and Sharrock 1993; Lynch 2008), there can be no questioning the fact that ethnomethodology has greatly influenced the development of social constructionist studies throughout a very wide range of research domains.

By explicitly forsaking a priori justifications of epistemological privilege in favor of a thoroughly empirical regard for rationality in

action, ethnomethodologists have given powerful impetus to the social constructionist agenda. However, they also invited some rather thorny questions that have haunted not only their own work but that of others who have followed the radically anti-foundationalist path. Perhaps most significantly: if they endorse neither the positivist presumption of direct observational access to the world nor any rationalist presumption to possess a universally valid epistemology, then exactly what grounds can ethnomethodologists, or any other anti-foundationalists, provide to support the intellectual legitimacy of their claims? By far the most prominent answer to this question has been to reference the real-time contingencies of academic dialogue (Lynch 1993, 144–147). In other words, rather than stake a claim to any principled entitlement to intellectual respectability, ethnomethodologists offer a retrospective claim (and a prospective pledge) to have been (and to continue to be) competently responsive to the contingent demands of academic dialogue as they emerge in situ—that is, in any actual case. This is a pretty good answer that is well supported by the manifest fact that ethnomethodology has been taken quite seriously indeed throughout the social sciences. However, it also begs some important questions.

Given the historically enduring fact that academic dialogue tends to be a deeply fragmented, contentious, and polysemous set of activities, what exactly could it mean to be adequately responsive to its contingencies? Are we not inevitably compelled to make hard choices about whom and what to take seriously amid a din of ongoing, cross-cutting academic disputes and discussions? Armed with foundationalist, or unquestioned, standards of epistemic authority, we would appear a good deal better equipped to make and defend these choices than we are if, following the ethnomethodological lead, we seek to improvisationally negotiate whatever epistemic landscapes in which we may find ourselves. The improvisational solution to the problem of epistemic legitimacy can also seem rather anemic and parasitic insofar as it conspicuously fails to provide guidance about how we might legitimately devise and defend epistemic standards of our own. So it is that we find the bulk of contemporary constructionist research situated between the horns of an apparent dilemma: either (1) refuse to problematize our epistemic standards and slip into a parochial rela-

tivism or mere sociology of error or (2) actively problematize those standards thereby confining ourselves to the ephemeral posture of what Theodor Adorno (1990) called a negative dialectic with the orthodoxies of others. If we adopt the first option, we remain vulnerable to the charge of blind dogmatism; if we adopt the second, we are relegated to the posture of gadfly or perpetual critic, and our capacity to defend any manner of constructive or cumulative research program is systematically undermined. To my mind, the most important developments in contemporary social constructionism stem from efforts to resolve this dilemma.

The Sociology of Scientific Knowledge

Proponents of the strong program in the sociology of scientific knowledge (SSK) have also exercised a profound influence on social constructionism. Scientific knowledge is the archetypal empirical example of valid knowledge in Western societies. It therefore provides the indispensable critical case for social constructionists who would hope to move beyond the sociology of error. Barry Barnes, David Bloor, Simon Schaffer, Steven Shapin, and others associated with the Science Studies Unit at the University of Edinburgh are widely credited as the first to consistently treat the theoretical contents of the natural sciences and mathematics as amenable to sociological explanation (but see also Bourdieu 1975, 1990a; Fleck 1979). Building on Thomas Kuhn's groundbreaking book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1970), Barnes, Bloor, and others articulated cogent critiques of the claim that sound science and epistemology are beyond the scope of sociological explanation. In Shapin's (1995, 297) words, "SSK set out to construct an 'anti-epistemology,' to break down the legitimacy of the distinction between 'contexts of discovery and justification,' and to develop an anti-individualist and anti-empiricist framework for the sociology of knowledge in which 'social factors' counted not as contaminants but as constitutive of the very idea of scientific knowledge. . . . SSK developed in opposition to philosophical rationalism, foundationalism, essentialism, and, to a lesser extent, realism."

However, despite its fierce opposition to philosophically foundationalist construals of science and mathematics, SSK remained equal-

ly fiercely committed to defending the sociology of science as itself a thoroughly scientific rather than antiscientific research program (Barnes 1974; Bloor 1991). Just like any other scientific enterprise, the sociology of science, they argued, must be a wholly naturalistic form of empirical inquiry dedicated to the production of maximally general theoretical laws that provide causal explanations of the phenomena under consideration. Far from being antithetical to the scientific ethos, they insisted, their sociologically relativist understanding of scientific knowledge was required by it (Barnes and Bloor 1982, 21–22). The indisputable fact that beliefs regarding what is and is not credible knowledge vary both culturally and by historical period requires the sociologist of knowledge to adopt a value-free naturalism that neither consecrates nor denigrates particular beliefs but seeks only to explain why people have adopted them. The Edinburgh School succeeded in articulating a theoretically powerful and radically sociological alternative to philosophically foundationalist arguments regarding the nature of valid knowledge. In doing so, they decisively established their studies as both the most important precedents and most important critical foils for all sociologists of knowledge who have since sought to follow in their wake.

The Edinburgh School offered macro-sociological explanations of scientific knowledge. The fact that controversy has been endemic to the scientific enterprise provided Edinburgh scholars excellent opportunities to use finely grained descriptions of the arguments asserted by scientific disputants to empirically demonstrate the manifest variance in their willingness to be persuaded by one another's reasoning. These episodes provided stark evidence that neither scientific reason nor the experimental findings brought to bear in these debates provided unequivocal grounds for their resolution. Hence, they inferred, the causes of both the disputes and their resolutions must be found beyond the manifest conduct of the debates themselves—that is, in the social structurally determined interests and intellectual dispositions scientific disputants brought to those debates (Barnes 1977; Shapin and Schaffer 1985). With relatively minor modifications, this approach was applied at a more micro-sociological level of analysis by Harry Collins and his colleagues at the University of Bath (Collins 1985). The sociological study of scientific controversies and their

closures became a major vehicle for demonstrating both the disunity of scientific rationality and the insinuation of broader social interests, dispositions, and processes into the very heart of scientific theory development. Because the production of scientific knowledge, it appeared, is inevitably socially interested, scientific knowledge must therefore be recognized as inevitably socially constructed.

Echoing broader Durkheimian tendencies in anthropology and sociology toward the study of “belief systems,” the Edinburgh and Bath schools cast the beliefs of scientists as relatively coherent conceptual schemes composed of general propositions woven together by a diverse set of Wittgensteinian family resemblances.⁶ Scientific practice was viewed as consisting primarily in efforts to expand the scope of particular belief systems by applying them to new cases in ways that could be justified among one’s peers. Hence, the benchmarks of scientific validity were identified as the locally agreed on epistemic standards of particular scientific movements rather than somehow transcendental epistemologies or ontologies. In opposition to foundationalist philosophy of science, SSK appealed to empirical cases of science in action to show that the progressive articulation of what Kuhn (1970) called scientific paradigms demonstrably is governed by neither a discernibly uniform methodology nor the intrinsic nature of things studied but by the creative inclinations of scientists themselves. However, because these inclinations are governed by the shared and relatively enduring interests of those involved, the continuous propagation of a paradigm does not result in its disintegration. Rather, epistemic standards remain as stable and enduring as are the shared social interests of those who honor them. Intellectual consensus follows shared interests. The empirical confirmation of scientific theories is thus cast as analogous to the empirical confirmation of witchcraft documented by E. E. Evans-Prichard among the Azande (Bloor 1991, 138–146).

Bloor’s impartial and symmetrical characterization of the reasons scientists and the Azande hold to their respective belief systems exhibits the SSK axiom requiring a totally value-neutral and naturalistic regard for the causes of people’s beliefs. This so-called principle of symmetry has proved a valuable rhetorical tool in SSK’s struggle to emancipate the sociology of knowledge from the sociology of error

imposed on it by foundationalist philosophers of science. It has allowed SSK to align itself with the value-neutrality espoused by scientists since the Enlightenment and to mount the serious, and credible, charge that philosophical foundationalism amounts to little more than a vestige of the theological dogmatism against which the likes of Galileo had to struggle. However, the principle of symmetry also has costs (see Freedman 2005; Pels 1996). Suffice it to note for now that the posture of value-neutrality implies a level of detachment from the world under study and an apparent commitment to what Dewey called the “spectator theory” of knowledge that is difficult to reconcile with the interest-governed theory of scientific knowledge with which SSK explains the scientific work of others. If, as Bloor (1991, 7) has argued, SSK-style explanations must be reflexively applicable to SSK itself, this tension seems to present a considerable problem. To date, there are conspicuously no SSK case studies of the social interests governing SSK. Insofar as reflexivity is a fundamental tenet of SSK, this seems a rather puzzling omission. One particularly plausible explanation for it is that the presumption to value-neutrality very seriously hobbles the prospects of reflexively identifying the particular interests governing SSK analyses.⁷

Despite this gap in its literature, SSK has done much to lead the way toward a viable solution to the social constructionist dilemma of reconciling the production of tenable epistemic standards with a thoroughly naturalistic, or empirical, regard for the processes through which that production takes place. So far, SSK may have downplayed the extent to which sociological knowledge is itself socially constructed, but a variety of others have been considerably less circumspect (Bourdieu 1988; Calhoun 2007; Camic, Gross, and Lamont 2011; Drew, Raymond, and Weinberg 2006; Lamont 2009; Turner and Turner 1990). However, if a reflexive sociology of sociological knowledge is to fully thrive, we must refine SSK’s principle of symmetry. While “good reasons” for holding a belief are inevitably socially constructed, or provisionally institutionalized normative conventions, it does not follow that they are equivalent to other kinds of social causes of belief (Freedman 2005; Kusch 1999). A viable approach to reconciling the assertion of tenable epistemic standards with a thoroughly sociological understanding of their production will require a more

nuanced, and less reductionist, regard for the relation between our commitments to those standards and other kinds of social causes, including our commitments to other social “interests.”

The Practice Turn

At least since Marx penned his famous “Theses on Feuerbach,” social scientists have found much to value in the notion of practice. Its appeal has been various. Marx himself saw the concept of practice, or “human sensuous activity,” as a resource with which to avoid the antinomy of idealism and materialism. This would, in turn, free us from “the chief defect of all previous materialisms,” which was to understand “the object, reality, what we apprehend through our senses . . . only in the form of *object* or *contemplation*” (Marx 1983, 155). The erroneous cleavage of reality from human sensuous activity resulted in a false Cartesian dichotomy between mind and body—subject and object—that prevents us from properly grasping either the nature of knowledge or the worldly causes and consequences of our various intellectual habits. Marx insisted that contemplation does much more than ethereally reflect on the nature of reality. It is, for better or worse, a product, feature, and consequential producer of reality. Hence, for Marx, the idea that knowledge could ever be “detached” or “disinterested” is at best a mistake and at worst a ruse designed to mask the complicity of intellectual authority with political and economic power.

The ideas that reason and knowledge are not detached and disinterested but historically conditioned and materially embodied forms of practical engagement with the world are also central to American pragmatist thought. The pragmatists argued that knowledge production, scientific or otherwise, should be freed from the misconceived dream of transcending the human condition. Epistemic standards should instead reflect our much more realistic concerns to merely improve the human condition. By pragmatist lights, the acquisition of knowledge thus consists not in developing what the philosopher Richard Rorty (1980) called a mirror of nature but in developing habits and practical skills that promote the good of the individual and society. Moreover, grounded as they are in the pursuits of actual com-

munities, epistemic standards are best understood with reference to the interests and activities of those for whom they hold rather than as abstract, universally valid principles. Pragmatists advise us to expect our epistemic terms of reference to be multiple and to change along with the changing conditions under which they are applied. The comparative evaluation of knowledge claims is not forsaken but nested deeply within the specific practical contexts within which it must inevitably be accomplished.

While these Marxist and pragmatist ideas never completely disappeared, their influence declined dramatically during the mid-twentieth century as structuralist, positivist, and otherwise scientific sensibilities overtook the social sciences. Primarily as a result of felt social pressures to emulate the natural sciences, mid-century social scientists embraced the principles of value-neutrality, detachment, and disinterested inquiry and thereby installed Cartesian fallacies into the heart of mainstream social science. The contemporary resurgence of interest in the idiom of practice reflects the widespread rejection of structuralism, positivism, and scientism by many of the most important social thinkers of the past forty years (Alexander 1982; Bourdieu 1990b; P. Collins 1991; Calhoun 1995; Foucault 1980; Garfinkel 1984; Giddens 1984; Habermas 1984; D. Smith 1987; B. Turner 1996). It also reflects a broader set of social scientific interests and challenges, including the antinomy between structure and agency; that between macro- and micro-levels of analysis; the ramifications of the fact that social action is embodied; and an increasingly meticulous regard for the phenomenology, temporality, and spatiality of “lived experience” and social interaction (Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina, and von Savigny 2001). These are, of course, a mutually implicative set of themes, but it is important to note that the practice turn in the contemporary social sciences consists only in a partial confluence of relatively distinct research programs. Many of the major philosophical developments of the twentieth century—including the phenomenologies of Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Michael Polanyi; Ludwig Wittgenstein’s insights regarding language use and rule following; Foucault’s genealogical investigations; Rorty’s anti-representationalism; and post-structuralism more generally—have also influenced the practice turn.

Proponents of the practice turn take seriously what SSK, following the philosopher Mary Hesse, calls the thesis of finitism (Barnes, Bloor, and Henry 1996). This is the idea that all our understandings of the world, including our scientific understandings, are inevitably learned. That is, they are the products of our particular, finite experiences and the specific, finite techniques we have acquired practically to cope with our lives. To the extent we share epistemic standards at all, they have been forged in, and enforced through, specific collaborative efforts to more effectively manage the myriad practical challenges we encounter. These standards, like any other tools, are things we devise and learn to use in the accomplishment of particular tasks. It follows, then, that epistemic standards well suited to one domain of practical activity may or may not be well suited to another. For example, the criteria we have devised to judge epistemic excellence in Western university settings may or may not be suitable outside those settings. The criteria we use to judge scientific excellence in the study of demographic trends may or may not be adequate to the study of conversation, and so on. By these lights, it is only under the specific conditions of their practical use that we may judge either the adequacy of our epistemic standards themselves or the adequacy with which they have been applied in any given case. Hence, we may note that various types of scientists may hold various levels of commitment to different epistemic standards depending on the types of research in which they participate.

Relatedly, insofar as epistemic standards are devised, learned, and applied in the course of specific practical activities, it follows that, in the first instance, those standards are tied to those activities rather than the particular people who participate in them. Whereas philosophically foundationalist epistemologies have tended to cast knowing as a relationship between an isolated rational mind (or linguistic proposition) and an enduring and self-consistent natural world, proponents of the practice turn tend to cast knowing as a matter of observably competent performance within a particular domain of practical activity (Chaiklin and Lave 1993; Hutchins 1995; Lynch 1993; Weinberg 2002). Epistemic standards thus are seen to pertain to more than just the use of descriptive, explanatory, or logical propositions. They extend to the whole range of discursive and nondiscursive

sive competences required to participate properly in a given practical domain. By these lights, epistemic standards cease to exist as fixed universal rules for validly linking “the mind” or “language” with a preformed natural world and come instead to be seen as provisional and socially situated rules for defining and identifying degrees of performative excellence.

Because their valid definition, identification, and practical engagement is inevitably predicated on these provisional and socially situated rules, the ontological characteristics of both knowing subjects and known objects lose their fixity and universality. Whatever characteristics subjects and objects are observed to possess are held to exist only in and through the embodied activities constituting the particular practical domains wherein they are observed to occur (Bourdieu 1990b; Coulter 1989; Goodwin 1994; Knorr-Cetina 1999; Latour 2005; Pickering 1995). Hence, for example, I have shown in my own work how the mental illnesses and addictions held to afflict patients in two recovery programs were given empirical form and causal force only in and through the distinctive patterns of therapeutic practice found in these programs (Weinberg 2005). Patients’ disorders were often identified and engaged in ways that bore no evident relationship to formally codified nosologies such as the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders IV*, and assessments of both their presence and absence in patients’ behavior were dictated only by the moral economy of program practice. Genetic, neurological, and other kinds of biological evidence that might be used to great advantage in other settings for the treatment of mental disorder had absolutely no part in it. This is not to argue, as some social constructionists have in the past, that ontology ought to be reduced to epistemology. Rather, it is to argue that neither our various ontologies nor our various epistemologies should be divorced from the historically situated social practices in which they arise, develop, and are given meaning and value.

The idiom of practice calls our attention to the fact that theorizing, language use, social action, and worldly events more generally derive their intelligibility and their value only from the socially constructed contexts within which they are observed. These social contexts may be those within which events actually occur, as when people observe and track the practical upshot of one another’s actions

in the course of interacting with one another. But they may also be the social contexts of more distant observers, such as social scientists, who track the practical upshot of people's behavior for their own social scientific activities (Bourdieu 1984b, 1987). Because different people know and value different things about these social contexts, they often interpret events differently.⁸ This is as true of social scientists as it is of the people we study. Neither segments of human behavior nor any other worldly events have unequivocal meaning. Their meanings are instead multiple and projected onto them by actors with any number of different practical interests in them. However, this by no means forecloses the possibility of evaluating different accounts of events as more or less helpful or astute, given the practical purposes for which these accounts are made. But such evaluations, and a critical consideration in the social construction of our epistemic standards, must involve identifying just what those practical purposes happen to be.