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Postprint version. This is a pre-copy-editing, author-produced PDF of an article accepted for publication in *British Journal of Social Work* following peer review. The definitive publisher-authenticated version in Volume 35, Issue 5, May 2005, pages 689-708, is available online at:
Publisher URL: http://bjsw.oxfordjournals.org/cgi/reprint/35/5/689

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Abstract
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Keywords
assessment, postmodern, social construction, genogram, ecomap

Disciplines
Social Work

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British Journal of Social Work (2005) **35,** 1–20
doi:10.1093/bjsw/bch200

Assessment and Social Construction: Conflict or Co-Creation?

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Summary

Assessment procedures in social work emerged within the historical context of modernist empiricism. They are lodged in assumptions of objectivity, measurement accuracy, value neutrality and scientific expertise. Within the context of postmodern constructionism, the grounds for traditional assessment are thrown into question. While such critique may seem to threaten the assessment tradition, such a conclusion is unwarranted. Rather, one may locate within the assessment tradition and constructionist writings converging lines of thought. Through the collaborative extension of two assessment exemplars—the genogram and the ecomap—we suggest new and more promising potentials for assessment practices in social work.

Keywords:

Scholarly storms within the social sciences take many forms: foundationalism versus postfoundationalism, empiricism versus post-empiricism, realism versus constructionism and modernism versus postmodernism. Social work practitioners are caught in the same maelstrom, particularly in relation to their assessment practices. Some practitioners remain steeped in traditional beliefs of objective assessments of the world, while others participate in postmodern dialogues on the social construction of reality. Must the schism between 'isms' in the social sciences also divide the field of social work? We think not, and in this article, we offer a means of working together toward more fruitful practices of social work assessment.

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We look first at the assessment tradition in social work, using two contemporary devices—the *genogram* and the *ecomap*—as exemplars of the evolution from diagnostic categorization to systemic contextualization. We then present a brief history of social constructionism[1] and its critique of the assessment tradition. Subsequent discussion builds upon earlier work in social work and allied professions to explore how constructionist ideas may transform assessment processes toward more generative ends. We conclude with specific examples of how collaboration between social construction and assessment can open new possibilities for the profession and those it serves.

The assessment tradition

Beginning with the settlement movements in the United States and England, the social work profession was a child of cultural modernism (Addams, 1910). As Jane Addams declared, based on her study of English settlements, 'The early American Settlement . . . insisted that each new undertaking should be preceded by carefully ascertained facts' (1910, p. 101). Subsequently, social work assumptions and practices became increasingly allied with rationalist principles and practices of science (Addams, 1910; Parton and O'Byrne, 2000; Webb, 2001; Walker, 2001). From the scientific standpoint, objects of study were 'there in the world', and the task of science was to describe and explain these objects as accurately as possible, without personal, ideological or other bias. These suppositions were most clearly represented in the social work diagnostic perspective (Woods and Hollis, 1990). This perspective, informed initially by medical science, posited the clinician as an expert investigator who ferrets out essential, individualized patterns of dysfunction in order to generate a blueprint for 'corrective' treatment. Accordingly, practitioners developed hypotheses about the nature of a problem and tested these hypotheses in terms of treatment processes and outcomes.

Although the terms 'diagnosis' and 'assessment' were originally used interchangeably in social work (Woods and Hollis, 1990), more recent literature differentiates their conceptual frameworks and units of attention. 'Diagnosis' implies an existence of relatively fixed 'conditions' or 'traits' of persons (Gambrill, 1997) that lead to clinical procedures and instruments focused on identifying and treating *individual* problems and deficits. This individual unit of attention became increasingly criticized for its inattention to environmental factors that may contribute to or exacerbate people's problems, such as economic injustice

[1] Constructionism is often confused with constructivism, yet these terms also denote quite different orientations. For constructionists, the site of construction is the relationship (language), whereas constructivists typically locate the process of construction in the mind of the individual (Bruner, 1986). Although other orientations, such as symbolic interactionism, social phenomenology, critical theory and ethnomethodology, also share certain constructionist premises, our concern here is with premises that are relational rather than those that still reflect a mind/world dualism.

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and societal discrimination. In contrast, 'assessment' became increasingly associated with measurement of *systemic* features or processes, such as family relationships and social interaction. This shift was particularly embraced by social work practitioners for whom the 'person-in-environment' paradigm reflected the profession's core concerns with resources needed to deal with life's problems and with relationships as a vehicle for increasing options and choices for problem-solving and living (Hepworth *et al.*, 1997; Houston, 2001; National Association of Social Workers, 1995).

Within this more systemic orientation to assessment, two devices gained particular prominence: the *genogram* (Carter and Orfandis, 1976; McGoldrick *et al.*, 1999) and the *ecomap* (Hartman, 1978). We selected these particular devices as exemplars because they or similar ones are used in organizational settings in many countries (Walker, 2001), administered by a broad range of practitioners, and were designed to move beyond individual diagnostics into more relational assessment formats. Although classification systems such as the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual (DSM) and Person-In-Environment (PIE) (Karls and Wandrei, 1994) are also used widely in social work assessment, they were designed primarily or secondarily as research tools and their focal unit of attention remains the individual. They are thus less fruitful devices than the genogram and ecomap for this initial exploration of the generative relationship between assessment and constructionism.

Briefly, the genogram organizes and graphs a family's life chronology, similar to a family tree. The genogram's multi-generational format assumes that family patterns are systemic, adaptational and repetitive. Demographics, genealogical relationships, structure, communication patterns, cultural origins, nodal events and roles are examples of characteristics and components of families that the genogram traces over generations. Symbols denoting the strength and salience of the connections are also graphed. In recent years, the genogram has been computerized. The genogram has been used internationally for many populations and practice settings, as McGoldrick and colleagues (1999) identify, e.g. foster children, gay and lesbian families, immigrants, the elderly, career centers, child welfare, family medicine and family counselling. Of particular importance in this article, White and Tyson-Rawson (1995) developed a variation of the genogram, called a *gendergram*, to examine the dynamics of gender within couples and families, in conjunction with developmental life stage.

Based on ecological theory about balance among elements in human and social systems, the ecomap depicts the family constellation and its auxiliary connections in environmental space. This assessment tool was developed originally to help practitioners examine the needs of families in the child welfare system (Hartman, 1978). Whether oriented to past or present, the ecomap configures the family spatially at a particular point in time in relation to significant others and to community organizations and institutions. As with the genogram, the strength and salience of the connections are graphed, illustrating whether the connections are nurturing, conflictual or

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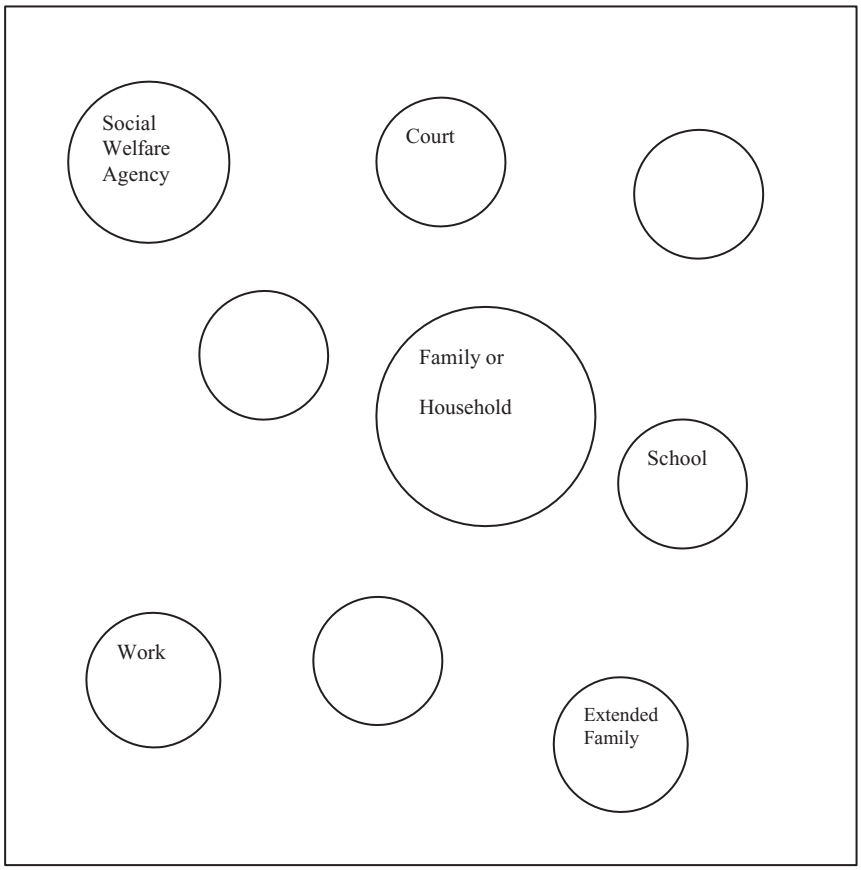

Figure 1 Ecomap

absent. Connections between external systems and individuals within a family, as well as with families as a whole, can be graphed. Among the variants of the ecomap format, Congress (1994) developed what she called a *culturagram* to graph the cultural history of immigrant families, their origins and reasons for emigration, and spatially denote the family's relationships with cultural, legal and service institutions and personal networks in the host environment.

Although much welcomed and widely used, systemic assessment devices such as the genogram and ecomap have been critiqued within the profession. Practitioners pointed to ways in which such devices can be sexist, paternalistic, patronizing and insensitive to issues of cultural diversity and societal differences in power (Nichols and Schwartz, 1998; McGoldrick, 1998; Green, 1998). In response, more recent orientations to assessment included analysis of power relations, and racial and ethnic inequalities (Akamatsu, 1998), and a broadened systemic perspective that is inclusive of multiple family forms (McGoldrick

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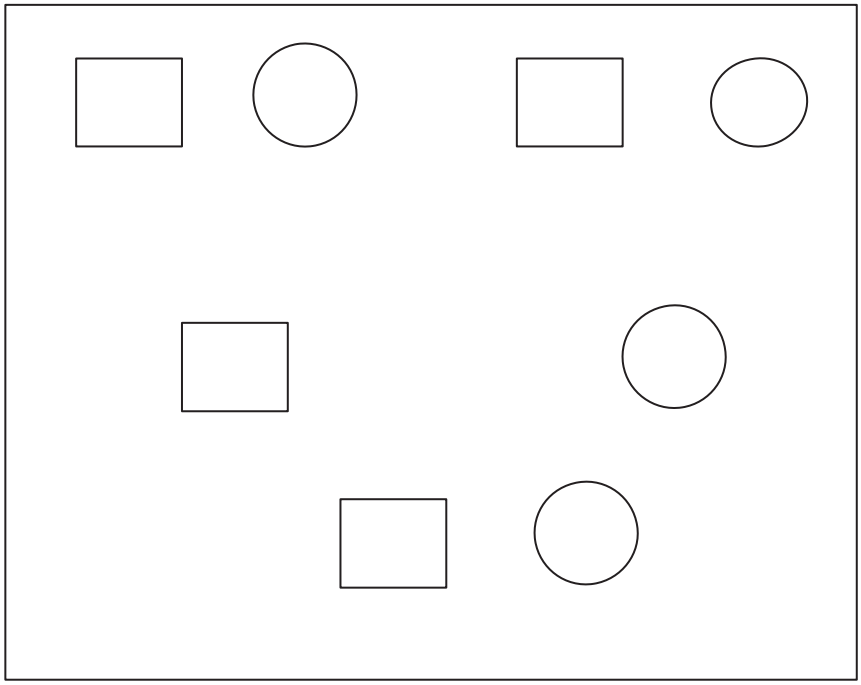

Figure 2 Genogram

et al., 1999). Concurrent with these critiques, an emergent wave of constructionist thinking raised significant questions regarding epistemology, more generally, and the idea of assessment, more specifically.

Social construction and the deconstruction of assessment

Social constructionist views of knowledge have a long history, but were ushered into recent prominence with the publication of Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962).[2] As Kuhn proposed, knowledge within any discipline depends on a shared commitment to a paradigm. Roughly speaking, a paradigm consists of an array of assumptions about what exists, how it functions, how it may be assessed and how scientific work ought to proceed. The importance of Kuhn's proposal to our exploration here is twofold. First, a commitment to a paradigm must *precede* the generation of knowledge. The commitment to an *a priori* set of assumptions and practices makes knowledge possible. In effect,

[2] Although Kuhn is a pivotal figure in social constructionist thought, other thinkers such as Foucault (1974) and Berger and Luckman (1967) are also quite significant in this regard. We use Kuhn's work here because its impact on constructionist thought was substantial, despite his more modest intentions.

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different paradigms will create different scientific realities, and there is no transcendent position from which to adjudicate among paradigms. Secondly, Kuhn's arguments trace the production of knowledge to communities—people in relationships—as opposed to 'individual minds'. Individual knowledge, according to this account, is not an individual achievement, but originates in community participation.

These views were further extended and enriched by major movements in literary theory and critical scholarship. Literary theorists, such as Barthes (1967) and Derrida (1976), pointed to the ways in which rules of language provide the grounds for what can be intelligibly put forward as knowledge. Our capacities to reason with others, or make sense of our world, are circumscribed by a linguistic forestructure. In Kuhnian terms, constitutive of any paradigm is a range of linguistic conventions or communally negotiated rules for how the world (or self) can be described or explained. Kuhn's work undermines the authority of any particular community, scientific or otherwise, to proclaim Truth, as Truth is a local achievement within a community and there is no means of justifying the local as 'true in all worlds'. Such premises were further addressed by scholars and practitioners concerned with social justice, oppression and the marginalization of minority groups in society. Foucault (1977), in particular, asserted that knowledge claims function as tools of power. As disciplines of knowledge disseminate their truths and become embraced by the populace, so is the populace 'disciplined'. As the reality and values of the truth-making group subtly erode the existing traditions, voices are silenced and we creep toward conditions of domination. In this sense, assessment of psychopathology or functioning, often aided and abetted by devices such as the genogram or ecomap, creates cultural conditions for deeming certain people as normal and others as diseased or dysfunctional. Re-theorizing assessment in this light introduces new consciousness about the practice by dislodging long-held assumptions about its benevolence.

These critical movements joined others to create a broad and active dialogue on social construction (Gergen, 1994, 1999; Potter, 1996; Billig, 1996). In the field of social work, Witkin (1990, p. 38) described constructionism as a metatheory that attempts to 'elucidate the sociohistorical context and ongoing social dynamic of descriptions, explanations, and accountings of reality'. As he saw it, constructionism devotes particular attention to the ways in which knowledge is historically situated and embedded in cultural values and practices. As a way of explaining past and present knowledge, emphasis is placed on the linguistic traditions that support, sustain and determine what can be known within cultural parameters (Parton, 2000, 2003) and, concomitantly, professional practices such as assessment (Levine, 1997). Further, social work scholars have been quick to see the moral (Weick and Saleebey, 1998) and ethical (Dean and Rhodes, 1998) implications of constructionist dialogues; of particular concern are the ways in which society's dominant knowledge establishments sustain particular ideologies (Chambon *et al.*, 1999). Rather than taking theory and the dominant forms of understanding as foregone conclusions, these scholars

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emphasized that what we take to be knowledge is bound by cultural assumptions, historical precedents and socio-cultural rules (Patterson, 1997). Arguing that 'the language forms available to us will constrain and influence the ways we make sense of the world' (Witkin, 1990, p. 40), such scholars emphasized the constructionist capacity to transform our thinking by exposing the mythical and potentially oppressive character of ordinary ways of describing and explaining phenomena.

From a constructionist standpoint, then, the process of all individual and systemic assessment practices is thrown into question (Guba and Lincoln, 1989; Sampson, 1993). Devices such as the genogram and ecomap are based on a historically and culturally situated paradigm, shared primarily by those within the discipline, and with no justification beyond that provided by the discipline itself. Assessment devices are believed to transform and reduce a complex and ever-fluctuating world into a narrow, simplified structure. This structure is described in a vocabulary that reflects the professional's specialized way of understanding and valuing (Holland, 2000), which is seldom the client's world (Milner and O'Byrne, 2002). The values carried by the instruments are not necessarily congenial with the client's and may actually be counter to the client's interests (Witkin, 2001). As typically used, the genogram and ecomap create a world of causal mechanisms in which the client's activity is characterized as an 'effect' of various forces and factors, both environmental and psychological. Agency is suppressed and other people are defined instrumentally as having good or bad effects. Relationships thus end up being evaluated in simplistic terms that often cut off further discussion and exploration.

Closely related, a constructionist critique alerts us to the ways in which assessment tools carry an overarching and inherent emphasis on client 'problems', thus prioritizing a deficit-based discourse as opposed to a language of 'potentials'. The problem-centred discourse also tends to favor professional expertise as the basis for resolution as opposed to the experiential knowledge of the client. In effect, the typical administration of assessment tools positions the therapist as the technical 'expert' who can diagram and diagnose the person and his or her life situation. The modernist practitioner uncovers essentialized patterns and determines whether they contribute to or hinder functioning. The information gathered by the tools thus provides a framework for the 'corrective' therapeutic work. Critics warn, however, that the interpersonal and institutional embeddedness of knowledge construction is thus suppressed. Within the current context of critical ferment, it is scarcely surprising that some scholars have suggested eliminating the entire language of 'assessment' from the clinical vocabulary (Laird, 1995; White and Epston, 1990), viewing it as a social construction that privileges the professional and disempowers the client.

We suggest that social work practitioners and scholars should strongly resist being drawn into an alienating clash between traditional realists and social constructionists, particularly as the competing positions pertain to the core role of assessment in social work practice. Parenthetically, similar discussions are currently taking place among social work researchers (Bolland and Atherton,

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2002). Although we confront paradigms in which the basic premises differ and conflicts appear irresolvable, rather than losing ourselves in conflict, we propose transformative dialogue (Gergen *et al.*, 2001), i.e. dialogue from which all parties may emerge with more finely nuanced, viable and productive opportunities. Of special significance in such dialogue is the location of positive potentials in the otherwise opposing sides, and the exploration of the ways in which these potentials may be merged.

Toward transformative dialogue

We suggest that what are presumed to be 'evaluative devices' within the field could actually be seen as 'constructing devices'. That they do construct the world is not, in itself, a shortcoming. To be engaged in the coordinated activities of making sense will virtually require such activity. When assessment tools are repositioned as constructing devices, we are freed from the myth of objective measurement. As a result, we may ask more pragmatic questions about the utility of assessment, such as: Who benefits from assessment? Who is silenced or denigrated? What doors to meaning are opened and which are closed? Furthermore, we can advance creative ways in which the devices can be drawn out from their modernist underpinnings and re-appropriated toward more generative ends. Two lines of argument prepare us for a collaborative exploration of possibilities.

Critique without foundations

What is often suppressed, forgotten or misunderstood is the foundationless character of constructionist critique itself. Critique within the modernist tradition served as an agent of correction in the search for true knowledge of world and self. As such, it was wedded to a belief in foundations of objective knowledge. In this sense, if criticism proved to be valid, its object was obliterated. For example, if research findings were found to be flawed, they were discredited and removed from the field. However, given the constructionist premise that all worlds, including those of the scientific researcher, are constructed within communities, there is no means of ultimate correction. It is impossible to compare the knowledge claims of competing communities save through standards that are themselves a by-product of some community of understanding. What is too often forgotten in constructionist critique, however, is that constructionism itself issues from just such a community.

With respect to social work assessment, constructionist critique cannot function as an ultimate corrective. Constructionism is delimited by the same claims as the assessment tradition: the views are intelligible, justified and legitimate within a particular tradition. To take a definitive or conclusive stance toward a traditional mode of practice, whether it be intervention, assessment or even the

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deployment of diagnostic codes, is antithetical to constructionism's appreciation for multiplicity as well as its refusal to essentialize discourse. In addition, using a constructionist critique to dismantle assessment leaves us blind to constructionism's generative possibilities. Moreover, while many of the organizing principles for constructionist thought have been formulated as suggestions for practice (Parton and O'Byrne, 2000; Witkin, 1999; Laird, 1995; White and Epston, 1990), there is no definitive 'social constructionist method'.

This is not to conclude that because constructionist critique lacks 'ultimate authority', it can be dismissed or sloughed off as 'merely opinion'. Rather, such critique calls upon us to recognize that we live in conflicting communities of the real and the good, and if we are to go on together, reflexive dialogue is essential. In effect, constructionist critique of assessment practices is significant primarily because it brings the heterogeneous cultural and global context in which we live to the fore of these practices. In this way, critique serves as incitement to mutually transforming dialogue.

The mining of shared assumptions

A second line of argument preparing us for the collaborative potential of constructionism and assessment revolves around examining assumptive similarities. We suggest that the contextual versus individualist assumptions underlying the genogram and ecomap, as well as their variants, the gendergram and culturagram, would generate broad agreement among constructionists in three domains. First, the traditional individualism favoured by much assessment and psychotherapy is deeply problematic. Secondly, understanding and intervention should take into account the broad network of persons, institutions and materials in which the person is embedded. Thirdly, communication processes are of vital importance to processes of positive change. While the assessment specialist might typically speak of these assumptions in terms of their truth, and the constructionist might see them as constructed, the favoured accounts would nevertheless bear a high degree of similarity. These congenialities in orientation invite a creative combining of forces.

Assessment as construction

If there are important grounds for collaborative inquiry between the assessment tradition and social constructionism, what specific outcomes can we envision? In our view, significant enrichment is possible, and the way has already been prepared in part by voices within the social work assessment tradition itself. We first consider two major ways in which assessment practices can be reoriented and then turn to the specific outcomes of such reorientation.

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Toward pragmatic potentials

Constructionist critique has done much to challenge the realities created by assessment devices. For example, the previously unassailable realities that comprised much of Bowen's theory and strongly influenced the genogram design, such as 'symptoms', 'pathology' and 'rationality', have all been subject to extensive critique. As Witkin noted, once stable concepts such as 'systems' and 'dysfunction' have been 'unpacked and reassembled as historical and cultural expressions', they give way to a sensibility whereby we understand 'language as constitutive of reality' (Witkin, 2000, p. 390). Abstract notions such as the 'dysfunctional family' become akin to what Marcus (1998) called a 'fiction of the whole'. As Laird pointed out, 'Some family theorists suggest that the idea of family itself is a widely varying social construction with shifting forms and boundaries and that it may not always be the most salient system in defining problems or in selecting the unit of attention for practice' (Laird, 1995, p. 153). Yet, within Laird's critique, we also locate grounds for the route toward reconstruction. Simply because concepts such as system, family, gender, dysfunction and the like are cultural constructions, we need not abandon them. If we jettisoned all constructions from our deliberation on persons, deliberation would be terminated. As Laird intimated, then, different realities may become salient under different conditions. More broadly, we have available multiple discourses for deliberating on our lives—discourses that may vary in their utility across time and circumstance.

This more pragmatic view of language—as contrasted with the realism or essentialism favoured by modernist readings—is not alien to the assessment tradition. Introducing the ecomap in 1978, Hartman noted that 'as one begins to think systems, one tends to move to the use of metaphor and to the use of visual models' (p. 466). While the systems metaphor may have been restrictive in terms of the essentialism it carried into the therapeutic milieu, Hartman elucidated ways in which the language forms available to us create, sustain and bind what can be known—a phenomenon perhaps best summarized by her later aphorism, 'words create worlds' (Hartman, 1991). In fact, Hartman's original conception of the ecomap provided a springboard for contemporary constructionist thought by moving assessment into *both* verbal and visual realms, thus providing a compelling rationale for use of the tools under a postmodern theoretical lens.

From assessment to collaborative assistance

Constructionist texts also invite us to see the assessment device not as an instrument for *finding*, but for *making*; i.e. not as a means of determining what is the case, but of creating visions of our world. Such a proposal does not eradicate the role of the professional; rather, it invites us to reconfigure this role in potentially promising ways. In particular, constructionist theory

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invites the practitioner to question, displace and/or eschew the traditional position of authoritative voice in favour of a dialogic and collaborative orientation. Such an orientation suggests the primacy of engaging in dialogues with those persons typically called clients, with a particular emphasis on the active negotiation of possible realities (Miehls and Moffatt, 2000). The client is thus not assessed in an essentialist fashion, but is assisted collaboratively and dynamically.

This transformation in the role of the practitioner is now flourishing in allied practice domains, as seen in the models set out by Anderson and Goulishian's (1992) 'collaborative language systems', White and Epston's (1990) and McLeod's (1997) 'narrative therapy' and Lynn Hoffman's (1992) 'reflexive family therapy'. Likewise, in Parton and O'Byrne's (2000) 'constructive social work', practitioners abandon the stance of knowing (e.g. 'Now I know what your problem is') and privilege the creation of collaborative dialogues (e.g. 'Shall we explore what meaning this problem has for you?'). In other words, practitioners engage with clients in an 'interpersonal construction process' (Fruggeri, 1992) that may generate new options and possibilities for thoughts, meanings, feelings and actions.

In our view, the two assessment, or 'assisting', tools discussed here—the genogram and the ecomap—are highly congruent with the goals of a dialogic practice stance. Because constructionism would shift the emphasis from information gathering to creating possibilities, the dynamic use of the genogram and ecomap throughout the practitioner–client contact period would counter essentialist tendencies and would model how families can continue dialogic processes in their future deliberations. Collaborating with clients to construct ways in which their lives can engage with the larger social and material context is also promising. Although traditionally used to graph the past or the present, the genogram and the ecomap readily lend themselves to graphing the *future*. Such collaborative practice, then, would not lead to conclusions about what is the case, but to new dialogic beginnings about how the case was constructed initially and how it could be written anew.

Transformative potentials of assessment dialogue

The question that must finally and most importantly be addressed is 'To what end?' Under a constructionist lens, we suggest that assessment tools become capable of transcending their own origins. We have outlined a way of understanding assessment as a collaborative deliberation on possibilities for one's life, one's relationships and the future. But, most importantly, what fruits may be yielded by such interchange? Three transformative outcomes involving collaborative inquiry deserve particular attention: challenging existing realities; realizing new realities; and the potential of continuous dialogue.

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Challenging existing realities

Constructionist theory foregrounds the ways in which people co-create the realities in which they live (Parton, 2003): the sense of individual persons, families, institutions, various goods and evils and the like. While this process is essential to viable relationships, the outcome is often a freezing of reason, desire and imagination. One finds oneself living in a world of obdurate facts and unassailable truths, such as 'I am old', 'poor', 'unloved' and 'without skills', and the impression is that they cannot easily be changed, if at all. For constructionists, these particular discourses of the real, rational and good are socially situated; if the relational/discursive configuration can be altered, so can the pattern of discourse. In this context, conversations of collaborative assistance can be extremely important in challenging existing patterns of freeing clients from the potentially strangulating effects of the taken-for-granted, and softening the boundary between the given and the possible (O'Hanlon, 1993; De Shazer, 1994). Two forms of challenge are especially significant: first, exploring whether an accepted reality may be meaningfully understood in another way (e.g. 'Is it possible that your child's Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder can be seen as a situation that emerges from her relationships within the culture at her school?') and, secondly, exploring the ways in which various persons, histories or relationships may limit, constrain or create one's realities (e.g. 'Who is to say that being old is a problem?' and 'Are there others who might paint a better picture of old age?'). The first form of conversation brings dominating discourses into question. It differs from its predecessor—'reframing'—by its grounding in discursive 'possibility' rather than practitioner 'knowledge'. The second focuses on the participants who may shape or challenge these discourses.

We suggest that the genogram and the ecomap, as well as the variants focused on gender and culture, lend themselves well to the process of challenging otherwise delimiting or oppressive realities. In a general sense, collaborative inquiry into new ways of understanding one's world often disrupts the more traditional realities of the self-contained individual. Relationships replace single individuals as the centre of attention. Moreover, within a constructionist frame, such tools also invite innovative uses; standardization gives way to conversational creativity. In the case of the genogram, the deconstructive potentials have long been apparent. As Hartman averred, 'Each individual is also part of a family saga, in an infinitely complicated human system which has developed over many generations and has transmitted powerful commands, role assignments, events, and patterns of living and relating down through the years' (Hartman, 1978, p. 473). What better place for a constructionist to begin challenging existing realities than at the sites of saga, stories and powerful commands?

The genogram is frequently used to map and track histories of mental disorder. However, deploying the instrument as a means of unsettling dominant realities, we might ask less about experiences or facts and more about constructions of

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those experiences and facts. For example, in discussing relatives labelled as 'depressive', we might shift the emphasis from 'the problem' to dialogue about the label itself. We might ask: 'Are there other possible descriptions or explanations?' 'What people have an investment in labeling the action as depression, as opposed to other, non-disease designations?' 'Who in your family might disagree with the diagnosis, or have another story to tell?'

In the case of the ecomap, visual illustration of how individuals and families perceive existing relationships with social institutions, often described in static terms, can be re-visualized as a dynamic construction of preferred future connections, especially when map construction is 'shoulder-to-shoulder', as Hartman (1978) originally proposed. One can even imagine being 'shoulder-to-shoulder' at a computer, making maps that are multidimensional and mobile. The process of identifying 'the nature of the connections' yields stories about the quality of family–society intersections (Parton, 2000) that can be converted into new stories about relationships with institutions or into new visions of environmental connections. For example, a *content* discourse about stressful relationships with a public assistance or child welfare organization could be re-storied as a *process* discourse, in which the client decides not to exert energies in these directions (Lax, 1992). More specifically, in response to the relentless demands in statutory arenas for regulatory decisions, client and worker can co-construct the ecomap to chart action possibilities and future-oriented institutional connections. Conversing reflexively in this way, individuals and families become empowered creators of relationships with their environments instead of passive recipients of institutions perceived to be omnipotent. Likewise, practitioners in statutory agencies, where 'risk assessment' has essentially replaced 'needs assessment' (Milner and O'Byrne, 2002), and where 'generative assessment' is non-existent, may be better able to balance the regulatory aspects of their work with more empowering possibilities. Parton and O'Byrne's (2000) risk assessment and decision-making tool, the *Signs of Safety Scale*, is an effort in this direction.

The genogram's gender-focused variant, the gendergram, already carries a logic of resistance. It is especially suited to deconstructing essentialized categories of gender en route to generating new options and sense-making capacities. As White and Tyson-Rawson noted, 'Once clarified, gender influences move from being invisible forces in systemic interaction to structures that can be influenced by individual and family decision making' (White and Tyson-Rawson, 1995, p. 253). Constructionist dialogue using a gendergram can facilitate gender-relevant narratives about responses, behaviours and related feelings at an earlier life period that can be rewritten or re-storied from a contemporary or future perspective—un-structuring, as it were. Gendered narratives can also be examined collaboratively in conversations about interactions between gender and social systems, institutions and policies. Meanings and interpretations can be negotiated and charted on gendergrams representing future life points, to be revised, expanded or discarded as further interpretations emerge.

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Similarly, the ecomap's culture-focused variant, the culturagram, might be deployed to challenge disempowering group narratives by tracing their sources in the dominant order and by highlighting areas of resistance, resilience and strength in the narratives. Constructionist use of both the ecomap and the culturagram allows for mutual storying about the quality of family–society connections and encourages a collaborative orientation toward politics. Practitioner and family members may examine how cultural dialogue might be influenced by social narratives, such as misogyny, racism, class bias and heterosexism. Of particular import to immigrant families, constructionist use of the ecomap and culturagram can open discussion about the meanings the family attributes to the expectable and the exceptional, whether clients' stories reflect cultural elements from both original and adopted countries, whether the stories have currency in the dominant culture or are silenced, and how new cultural story elements can emerge. For example, is there a language in the adopted culture for a family's health beliefs, role functioning, values, holidays and special events? If not, these tools could be used dialogically to imagine new spaces for their inclusion.

Realizing new realities

In bringing new realities into being, dialogue may be focused on new resources, images, metaphors or narratives, each serving as a lattice for alternative courses of action. One overarching reality that combines the interests of both social constructionism and these assessment devices is that of relationship itself. For constructionists, all realities, rationalities and senses of the good derive from relationship. In effect, processes of relationship are prior to the concept of individual mind. The process of rendering visible new relations outside the person is, in fact, among the stated goals of the assessment exemplars. Citing Hartman again, 'The ecomap . . . pictures the important nurturant or conflict laden connections between the family and the world. It demonstrates the flow of resources, or the lack and deprivations. This mapping procedure highlights the nature of the interfaces and points to conflicts to be mediated, bridges to be built, and resources to be sought and mobilized' (Hartman, 1978, p. 467). In light of Hartman's description, the tools can be used to challenge, reflect upon and regenerate or co-create the reality and significance of relationship, among persons as well as between persons and social institutions.

Yet, the realities of relationship are not the only possibilities to be opened by collaborative assistance. Many would agree, for example, that conversations around the gender-focused genogram might enable women to find a new voice. As Weick (2000) pointed out, women clients are often limited by the dominant, androcentric realities in which they are immersed. Collaborative assistance may thus enable women to find what Weick calls a 'first voice'. The first voice is used when women are free from the constraints and formalities that patriarchy imposes. The first voice contains 'the richness of emotion, the intimacy of

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shared feelings, and the ease of unedited thoughts that form the first boundaries of an individual's view of the world. For women, this language remains their first language, with a syntax and rhythm that remains their most natural form of expression' (Weick, 2000, p. 398). By charting the forces that inhibit this first voice, as well as the relationships that may support its growth, the gendergram can play a generative role in what Laird (1989) called 'restorying women's self constructions'.

From a constructionist perspective, the genogram's emphasis on intergenerational transmission can be viewed as the re-telling of family stories, some of which may reflect dominant understandings of society and/or problem-saturated understandings of one's history. With the emphasis placed on opening new possibilities, exceptions to the dominant stories or successes rather than problems can be used to establish counterplots. Similarly, family members can map the elements they wish to continue building while elucidating those areas of a narrative that may no longer empower the family. Gathering associations about family members of a similar name, gender or geographic location can bring forth reminiscences or stories that have become part of the family mythology. Salient or repeated narratives about family members through the generations may also help current members connect with family stories, new or old, that can highlight strengths or generate new relations for reinforcing bonds and enhancing their sense of 'we'. Kuehl (1995) also outlined a number of ways in which the genogram can be used to enhance potentials. He suggested using presuppositional questions (open-ended questions, designed to enhance awareness of strengths and the inevitability of change), scaling questions (which help clients break problems into smaller, more manageable parts), future generation questions (describing what the client would like to see different) and collapsing generational time (asking how the client is already dealing with this problem differently from past generations).

More generally, it is important that the new reality be 'actionable'. As the client explores the details of the alternative reality, citing examples, telling relevant stories, detailing the particulars and elaborating on the implications, he or she is also testing out a new vocabulary of relating—whether with practitioner, family member, court official or policymaker. Innovations are invited as well, e.g. can a new design or format of one of the assessment graphs be created? In effect, such conversations enable the practitioner to use assessment tools in ways that transcend the traditional diagrammatic function of 'portraying one's life world' en route to generating new stories that can be performed through dialogue and beyond.

The potential of continuous dialogue

A third outcome of assessment as collaborative inquiry can best be understood in terms of certain limits inherent in the search for new voices, metaphors or narratives just discussed. As new constructions are grasped, and their implications

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played out in practice, they now become candidates for 'the real'. Although effective in the short term, as life conditions change and relationships unfold, their utility may erode. The new understanding may begin to function as a constraint, limiting deliberation and action. There is utility, then, in 'going beyond the narrative', or the fixing of any one or essential construction of the real and the good (Gergen and Kaye, 1993). The kind of collaborative dialogue we have been advocating can serve as a model for continuous transformation, facilitating not just a renegotiation of experience, but an understanding of the premises underlying meaning making itself. In this sense, assessment dialogues should focus less on 'the new answer' than on being perpetual 'works in progress'. The graphs should be revisited throughout consultation, not completed and filed at the initial session. Although assessment practices were originally intended to be used in this way, they seldom are (Milner and O'Byrne, 2002). In contrast, the dialogic encounter may evoke a continuous appreciation of the not-yet-seen, the yet-to-be-storied—in short, the possible. Herein lies a major transformative potential of assessment in a constructionist key—a potential that can be realized through the discriminating and innovative use of the two assessment exemplars we have discussed here, their variants and even, perhaps, the formats of the DSM and Person-In-Environment (PIE) (Karls and Wandrei, 1994) systems. Saleebey's (1992, 2001) work points in this direction through application of a 'strengths perspective' to the DSM system and his emphasis on the client telling his or her own story.

Continuing the conversation

We suggest that constructionism offers an exciting and comprehensive meta-analytical lens for revisioning the practice of assessment. Rather than branding assessment as an inherently reactionary/modernist process, a constructionist alliance enables assessment to become a collaborative inquiry into transformative possibilities. Because of their shared concern with the relational surrounds, we propose that the genogram and ecomap are particularly well suited for a constructionist revisioning. In both cases, the assessment tools help to create a reality of relationship and invite thinking in multiple and shifting fields of relationship. By employing these tools dialogically, the client and practitioner can challenge the delimiting realities of the present and open up new possibilities for understanding and action. Moreover, the dialogical inquiry itself serves as a model for a continuous relational unfolding. Such possibilities may be particularly fruitful in statutory settings wherein the collaborative use of the genogram and ecomap can mediate power differentials and hierarchies, transforming conflictual stand-offs into co-constructed interpretations, decisions and future action. At the same time, constructionist use of the genogram and ecomap, as well as scales such as those suggested by Parton and O'Byrne (2000), can satisfy the needs of courts and other statutory agencies for tangible information for decision-making. Conducting conversations about gains rather than losses, and

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safety rather than dangers, as Parton and O'Byrne (2000) and other constructionist and solution-focused theorists (De Shazer, 1994) have suggested, could satisfy the Department of Health's new emphasis on needs, partnerships and social networks in child and family services in the United Kingdom (Houston, 2001) and provide new directions for the beleaguered child welfare field in the United States. In all domains, then, solutions and future actions can be made operational and measurable for officials so inclined. Even so, the assessment processes would remain continuous, collaborative, generative and client-empowering, thus fostering the goals of restorative justice (Burford and Adams, 2004) in all social work practice venues. The construction of assessment processes that are fully collaborative, relational and directed toward 'the possible' provides a means of vitalizing practice principles and extends social work's historic investment in human agency and equity.

Accepted: April 2004

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Acknowledgements

The authors appreciate comments on the ideas presented in this paper provided by workshop participants at the Family Resource and Training Centre in Singapore in 1998, at the NASW International Fall Symposium in Heidelberg,

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Germany in 1999, and at the Houston-Galveston Institute/Taos Institute Conference on Social Construction and Human Transformation in Galveston, Texas in 2000. We also appreciate the helpful comments of Stanley Witkin, Joan Laird, Nigel Parton and BJSW reviewers on earlier drafts.