Am Soc (2013) 44:1–22
DOI 10.1007/s12108-012-9172-3

Igniting Constructionist Imaginations: Social Constructionism's Absence and Potential Contribution to Public Sociology

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Published online: 29 December 2012
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Abstract Why have social constructionists remained absent from debates over public sociology? I argue that constructionist scholarship would be particularly amenable to Michael Burawoy's notion of 'organic' public sociology, given the ability of constructionist scholars to orient awareness contexts in order to help engender constructionist imaginations. This approach requires that constructionists take on a different view of the role of the analyst. I also discuss some of the problems Canadian academics have had engaging with the media in their efforts to engage in 'traditional' public sociology, as well as what a constructionist public sociology may look like practice. I conclude by addressing potential challenges to a constructionist public sociology within Canada, including reference to sociology's disciplinary coherence and how we can approach—and what we mean by—'publics'.

Keywords Public sociology · Social constructionism · Youth crime · Media · Sociological imagination · Constructionist imagination

> All I got is a red guitar
> The rest is up to you—U2, Bono, All Along the Watchtower

The constructionist approach compelled me to initiate doctoral research. Having spent some time as a volunteer probation officer working with young offenders, I became intrigued by the debates revolving around youth crime and youth justice policies. Constructionism seemed an appropriate choice to explore questions about how claims-makers contest young offender identity and culpability. I began my doctoral studies at McMaster University where, during my first year in the programme, the university held a symposium in response to Michael Burawoy's

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(2005) iconoclastic advocacy of public sociology. The symposium elicited views which were both supportive and critical (see McLaughlin et al. 2005: 148). I set these debates aside, however, settling into the more pressing task of researching and writing my dissertation.

Having recently completed my doctoral studies, and reflecting on the potential value of my analysis to various public markets, I began to take a closer look at the public sociology debates and noticed a marked absence of any rejoinders, positive or negative, from social constructionists (or, for that matter, other 'interpretive' sociologists such as symbolic interactionists, ethnomethodologists or post-modernists). My aim here is to explore possible reasons why social constructionism has remained absent from the debates over public sociology, and to argue that there is much constructionist scholars could contribute to what Michael Burawoy refers to as 'organic' public sociology (discussed below). I also draw attention to problematic assumptions regarding professional and critical sociology in Burawoy's model, especially given a continuing association linking professional sociology with positivism, and critical sociology with ideology. These associations offer no inroads for constructionist analyses offering an alternative to both positivism and critical sociology. Constructionism has the potential to instill *orienting awareness contexts* amongst various publics. This approach presents a variant on the concept developed by Glaser and Strauss (1964), enabling a reflexive interaction with publics that also instills a sociological (specifically 'constructionist') imagination regarding social problems (Furedi 2009).

Following a discussion of these arguments, my focus shifts to Canada, where public sociology faces several challenges. I explore these challenges with reference to how youth crime scholars in Canada deal with the demands of speaking to various media outlets, as well as how media sources often distort their statements. I then offer a vision of what a potential organic public sociology, informed by constructionism, may look like. I conclude by reflecting upon sociology's disciplinary coherence in Canada, and suggest that we should explore which publics may be most amenable to constructionist scholarship and fostering the reflexive dialogue that may spark constructionist imaginations.

Explaining the Constructionist Silence

The initial promulgators of the social constructionist perspective on social problems, Spector and Kitsuse (1977), argued that sociology had yet to develop a specifically *sociological* examination of social problems, given the prior dominance of normative/positivistic formulations. The central task was not the assessment of objective conditions but the "activities of individuals or groups making assertions of grievances and claims with respect to some putative conditions" and the subjective qualities of their claims (1977: 75). Questions were directed towards how social problems are formulated, as well as how those constructions are maintained and potentially change over time (1977: 76). In taking such a stance, constructionists are not dismissing or minimizing 'real' social problems. They are simply focusing their analytical gaze on questions that are different from those who take a normative approach.

This dynamic approach to the study of social problems has inspired decades of research across a wide variety of social problems that are unquestionably relevant to publics. Studies have explored child abuse, alcoholism, clergy sexual abuse, infertility, and the homeless mentally ill, among many other examples (see Best 1995). Perhaps the most salient aspect of the constructionist paradigm is not its epistemology but its proscription for the *role* of the sociologist. Gusfield's (1984) suggestion that constructionists remain "on the side [lines]" with respect to their examination of social problems is simultaneously an epistemological position as well as a warning. It suggests that constructionists should not focus on 'undermining' or 'debunking' claims, as this places the analyst in the tenuous position of being a participant in the definitional activities that should be the object of study (cf. Glassner 1999). The constructionist perspective, therefore, not only sets as a research agenda the hermeneutic factors involved in social problems formulations, but a proscription against the analyst 'taking a side' and making statements to various publics regarding the objective conditions of social problems. As statements regarding objective conditions are themselves to be part of the analysis, the analyst must extricate her/himself as best as she/he can in order to observe the processes through which formulations are rendered and received.[1]

Spector and Kitsuse's initial and influential formulation also included some explicit warnings directed towards sociologists of social problems who opt to address broader publics. They pointed to the presence of institutional pressures from competing disciplines and professions that act to draw attention away from the sorts of definitional questions that constructionists ask (1977:64), warning that sociologists may "find it to their advantage to promote and call attention to some antecedents of any condition and to ignore or dismiss others as insignificant" (1977: 69). Additionally, drawing from the value-conflict approach, they warned that as sociologists begin to seek public recognition for their research, sociological analysis ceases as analysts become a part of the social problem they are analyzing. Quoting Merton and Nisbet (1971), they pointed to the tendency among sociologists to define their role as "scientists who are laboring on behalf of society, protecting society, trying to improve society, and providing expertise to determine the most effective policy" (1977: 69). Clearly, their critique targeted sociologists who wished to influence policy arenas. Spector and Kitsuse argued that "to enter the policy-making process of social problems activities is to become subject to pressures that may lead to the abandonment of definitional questions in favor of the applied, practical, policy-oriented issues that are adjudicated by participants" (1977: 71). From this perspective, perhaps even more than other sociologists, those who study social problems are lured to speak out on "practical" questions directed at policy, and goaded into accepting publics' "underlying positivistic assumptions" (1977: 71). These warnings have likely drawn many constructionists away from engagement with publics due to the potential ensnaring politics accompanying such attempts. This continuing influence may go far to explain

[1] The ability to remain faithful to a 'value neutral' or 'on the sidelines' goal is one fraught with difficulties, both methodological and epistemological. However such difficulties are not necessarily germane to social constructionism per se, and I do not engage this issue directly in this paper. Such difficulties remain important to address, however, with respect to the ability to faithfully transmit interpretive sociological knowledge to publics.

why constructionists have remained reticent in responding to Burawoy's clarion call for public sociology. It is of course equally feasible that over time, faithful to the original vision promulgated by Spector and Kitsuse, constructionists developed a natural blind spot for the writings of Michael Burawoy and the debates which emerged over public sociology during the last few years.

Public sociology is inherently political, while constructionism usually objects to any political engagement that may act to undermine its value neutral analyses. This explains both the emotionally charged reactions to Burawoy's advocacy of public sociology as well as interpretive sociologists' lack of participation in these debates. These contentions are, Denzin (2002: 110) argues, exacerbated by a "fragmented" discipline easily "seduced by abstracted empiricisms and faddish middle-range theories." Denzin's criticisms of the legacy left by Goffman, for instance, are based on his concerns that in being "aloof" and remaining on the sidelines (Becker 1967; Gusfield 1984), "critical, interpretive sociology" will fail to "craft an emancipatory discourse that speaks to the forms of life under neoliberal forms of democracy and capitalism" (2002: 114).

Of course long-standing tensions between objectivism and relativism have also produced debates within feminism, specifically over social constructionism (here more generally referred to alongside relativism and post-modernism) and the need for 'consciousness raising'. Some have taken the position that constructionism is "an extremely risky position for feminist politics" (see Bohan 1993: 16). To achieve political change and consciousness raising, a base of essentialism, some feminists have argued, is required. Feminists may find constructionist arguments undercut the political efficacy of their attempts to engage with the "real world out there"; for example, in advocating that lesbian mothers are not unfit to parent it may be argued that they are "just like" heterosexual mothers (Speer 2000: 520). This argument is undergirded by a frame of essentialism, or an objective anchoring point. Nevertheless, some who have examined the critiques against relativism still advocate for a feminism informed by relativism and conctructionist precepts (see Hepburn 2000). Similar to the remarks made by Spector and Kitsuse in the 1970s, Hepburn (2000: 101–02) argues "it is important to be clear that without the relativism of a strong constructionist position, as a researcher you are left with the difficult job of arguing for, and providing evidence of, non-constructionist realities." Left unclear is what a feminist constructionist analysis may look like: whether it would merely "(re)present what's already there" or whether taking sides is acceptable (p. 520). Equally unclear is how such an analysis would be communicated with particular publics. Here too, it is the role of the analyst that, at root, motivates contention.

Within the sociology of social problems, these concerns are also related to the self-referential debates within constructionism regarding the ways in which analysts orient themselves to objective conditions (Best 1989; Best 2003; Gusfield 1985; Rafter 1992; Troyer 1992; Woolgar and Pawluch 1985a, 1985b; see also Abbott 2001). Despite differences, many constructionists argue that their analyses do not serve to deny or 'debunk' reality, but to suspend judgment in order to render a more hermeneutically honed explication of the sociological processes involved in social problems formulations and permutations (e.g. Woolgar and Pawluch 1985a, b: 160). Nevertheless, the range of 'types' of constructionism that emerged from these debates relates to particular analyst's views regarding political engagement. Ibarra and Kitsuse

(2003), for instance, underscore Spector and Kitsuse's (1973) and Kitsuse and Spector's (1973) emphasis on the strictly analytical, value neutral analysis of social problems processes. Others take a more critical stance to the analysis of claims, comparing and contrasting them within specific contexts in order to make sense of social problems often associated with moral panics (Best and Horiuchi 1985; Best 1990; Jenkins 1998; Jenkins 2003; Reinarman and Levine 1997). Best's interpretation of statistics as "good," "bad" and "ridiculous," for example, seems related to his need to communicate with publics who often misread the extent and severity of social problems due to their statistical illiteracy (Best 2001: 161; Best 2004; Best 2005: 211). Still others give analyses along similar lines as constructionism but render more brash pronouncements about the truth and falsehood of claims, suggesting that some claims (related, for example, to cultural fears) are unfounded (e.g. Glassner 1999). Glassner also appears to be motivated to help publics recover from their putative 'misrecognition' of objects of fear.

Despite this range within constructionism, constructionists and other 'interpretive' sociologists remain reticent to become involved in public sociology (but see Kelly and Farahbakhsh 2012). While this may be understandable, this reticence requires explication and problematization. Firstly, constructionist trepidation regarding involvement in policy circles, while justifiable, does not acknowledge Burawoy's own concerns regarding an unchecked 'policy sociology' which abuses and distorts sociological knowledge (2005c: 420), and more significantly, the differences between 'policy' and *organic* 'public' sociology (2008: 340). I discuss this in more detail below. There are other concerns relating to Burawoy's own formulations, and others' interpretations of them, that also create points of confusion and likely create reticence on the part of constructionists to get involved with public sociology. These points must be addressed before the pavement is laid upon which a constructionist rejoinder to public sociology can stand. Central is an ongoing and persistent association of professional sociology with 'mainstream' positivistic sociology, and the juxtaposition of this 'quadrant' with that of critical sociology. It is unclear where frameworks such as social constructionism fall within this schema. Also left vague is the notion of 'public'; that is, certain publics are ostensibly more likely to dilute, distort and/or malign complex sociological knowledge—knowledge that other publics are equally likely to embrace. Social constructionists should seek to influence publics while remaining 'on the sidelines'. This is a challenging proposition, perhaps, but one worthy of pursuit. The best way to do this is to explore how to cull reflexive relationships with public markets ready to welcome the complex and ambiguous interpretive processes that constructionism underscores (McLain 2002).

I explore this potential first by addressing some assumptions regarding Burawoy's public sociology model, opening up a space where a reflexive constructionist imagination may germinate with receptive publics.

Inroads for Constructionism: The Restricted Formulation of Professional Sociology

Burawoy's influential quadratic model of sociology, best approached as a heuristic tool rather than a concrete formulation, is between policy, public, professional and

critical sociology. Policy sociology links with the use of sociological knowledge in the service of specific clients. Social problems are defined by publics and brought to the sociologist to solve, or to approve solutions already arrived at by clients (2005: 9). Public sociology involves direct, "face-to-face" unmediated dialogue with local, active communities (2005: 7; 2008: 340; 2009c: 876). Seemingly in line with Habermas (1984 [1981], 1991 [1962]; see also Nichols 2009: 29), Burawoy's vision seeks to transform public perceptions by opening lines of communication between academics and various publics, fostering interaction both between and amongst these publics. Burawoy distinguishes his own formulation as 'organic' public sociology, which differs from its traditional form, where the sociologist as expert is seated at an authoritative pulpit, engaging in unidirectional dialogue with public markets (2005b). Forms of traditional public sociology include writing newspaper editorials and giving interviews (2005: 7; see Kowalchuk and McLaughlin 2009 for an empirical assessment of Canadian scholars' useage of newspaper opeds). However, these forms fail to establish the interactional connections necessary for open dialogue regarding sociology to bear fruit.

Organic public sociology, in contrast, involves the creation of a bond with groups outside of academia that is much more dynamic and malleable. It involves a reflexive, mutually constitutive dialogue between sociologists and the publics they seek to influence (2005: 9). Organic sociology remains an ideal type both in the Weberian sense and with respect to its ideal potential for constructionist public sociology. It potentially opens empathetic spaces for setting up interactional arenas between analysts and publics. Moreover, it is within these interactional arenas that lines of communication are more likely to emerge with the potential to embrace interpretive sociological knowledge. I elaborate on this potential further below.[2]

The next two elements in Burawoy's model are critical and professional sociology. Critical sociology is important in Burawoy's model to keep professional sociology in check and to make it "aware of its biases" (2005: 10). Then, at the "heart" of this model is professional sociology, which both shapes and is shaped by the other three aspects of sociology (2005: 15). Burawoy defines professional sociology as providing "true and tested methods, accumulated bodies of knowledge, orienting questions, and conceptual frameworks" (2005:10).

Since professional sociology remains the nexus in this model, pinned to the other quadrants, it is important to consider Burawoy's treatment of it, as well as his critics. Burawoy ties professional sociology to the aims of testing "narrow hypotheses" and "mimicking the natural sciences," advocating for the other three quadrants to keep each others' respective 'pathologies' in check (2005: 15). Professional sociology, he adds, "defends the conditions of science" and "justifies itself on the basis of scientific norms, …producing theories that correspond with the empirical world" (2005: 16).

[2] I am not trying to imply that Burawoy's model of organic public sociology is 'better' than traditional public sociology per se. Traditional public sociology is still ideal for dealing with very large groups where in-depth interaction is unfeasible. Organic public sociology is most amenable to a *constructionist* public sociology centered on small groups where extended engagement and reflexive, mutually constitutive interactions are fostered.

While Burawoy declares that he is "committed to science" (2005c: 424), it is unclear how social constructionism or other 'interpretive' sociological approaches would fit his model.

Even those expressly critical of Burawoy's model assume a 'positivist' professional sociology. Turner (2005) forcefully argues that professional sociology should remain the focus for the dissemination of sociological knowledge; that publics and policymakers are best left to draw their own conclusions, and—put cynically—will only listen when sociology has something "useful" (2005: 34) to say. Furthermore, he suggests, professional sociology can bolster sociology's utility through its connection with the "epistemology of science" (2005: 28). Perhaps the most overtly critical (and equally cynical) response comes from Tittle (2004), who worries that sociology has very "little legitimacy" as it presently stands, with no reliable body of knowledge (2004: 1641). Focusing strictly on professional sociology would enable sociologists to follow "the canons of science" and concentrate on the testing of empirically based theories that are capable of falsification (2004: 1642). Boyns and Fletcher, likewise, accuse Burawoy of excessive idealism, advocating instead for the development of a "strong program" for professional sociology which is "organized around falsification" in order to "clarify scientific insights" (2005: 7). Ghamari-Tabrizi's (2005) criticism rests, somewhat differently, on the potential institutionalization of public sociology. He suggests that contention over the appropriate inclusion of value/moral judgments coupled with the scientific study of sociality is almost as old as sociology itself (2005: 362). However, his critique also assumes that professional sociology involves the analysis of "concepts and classifications." He argues that "positivism creates a world without ambiguity," but fears that such knowledge will be diluted and distorted within public markets to become 'pop sociology' (2005: 364).

Tellingly, when referring to the development of professional sociology in post-World War II California, Burawoy identifies two traditions: comparative/historical, and 'micro-sociology'; the latter of which included experimental social psychology as well as symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology. He says these micro approaches were concerned with bracketing temporal and spatial contexts, and "indeed *make a fetish out of such bracketing*" (2008: 343, my emphasis). Constructionists often refer to the process of 'bracketing' the claims being studied. This involves selecting which interpretive processes will be analyzed, and which, concomitantly, will be suspended temporarily from that analysis (see Gubrium and Holstein 2000). Burawoy appears to reveal his disdain towards such approaches. This seems to have resulted in professional sociology becoming strictly associated with the testing of normative theories and finding of normative solutions to social problems. The place of interpretive sociological approaches within this model is left ambiguous. In addition, this association reifies the notion that only normative forms of sociological knowledge are suitable for public dissemination.

Moreover, coming to the defense of a positivistic professional sociology may well be a natural line of attack given the only other perceived option being the overtly Marxian ideology often associated with critical sociology. Given the two choices, professional sociology is at best the lesser of two evils. Some have expressed concern for Burawoy's affiliation with Marxist sociology, and have voiced concerns regarding

the role and place of critical sociology in relation to the other sociological quadrants. Turner (2005: 29), for example, worries that critical sociology has polluted and annexed professional sociology's agenda. Moreover, he feels that this left-wing influence is damaging sociology's public credibility (see also Boyns and Fletcher 2005: 10–11; Brady 2004: 1634; Calhoun 2005: 357; Nielsen 2004: 1621).[3] My critique, alternatively, rests on the impression that Burawoy's explication of critical sociology as a corrective for professional sociology draws on too many assumptions linking professional sociology with positivistic science. It may not behoove one to advocate a model of equilibrium between 'positive' professional sociology and 'ideological' critical sociology if the tensions that exist *within* professional sociology are more fully explicated.

Interpretive approaches, such as social constructionism, provide a 'middle way'—an alternate corrective to professional sociology that need not refer to a critical tradition which continues to be closely associated with Marxism. While Scott (2005: 407) argues that "scientific objectivity must …be maintained" in order to communicate effectively within policy and political contexts, the insights of constructionist analyses offer a promising framework for communicating the more hermeneutic aspects of sociality. This approach is similar to McLain's (2002) advocacy of reflexivity in order to enable a more efficacious sociology of practice that bridges both positivistic and critical orientations. McLain argues that "positivism protects sociological autonomy at the expense of utility by promising instrumental results along the lines of the natural sciences" while "Critical/hermeneutic approaches marginalize practice by shifting emphasis to utility, and thus sacrificing autonomy by exposing sociology to accusations of ideological bias" (2002: 252). It is likely that McLain would be equally critical of professional and critical sociology set up as mutually reinforcing straw pieces within the public sociology debates.

Though limited, others have strongly advocated for 'interpretive' sociological methods in their support for public sociology. Notable is Vaughan's (2005) suggestion that her influence upon NASA's social policies was based more on the "thick description" generated through her ethnographic work, rather than her advocating for or against a particular 'position'. Her epistemological stance "enable[ed] readers to recognize patterns and make that important connection between personal problems and public issues" (2005: 412). Vaughan challenges those who suggest that policy makers as a whole are adverse to theoretically and conceptually dense sociological insights. Her ethnographic contribution

[3] Burawoy's Marxist affiliation is more apparent in his *Critical Sociology* article (2005b) than the more muted critical presence in his *American Sociological Review* paper (2005). In the former, for instance, his advocacy for "the project of sociological socialism" (2005b: 325) is necessary considering a world which "lags behind sociology" and requires transformation (2005b: 317–318). I agree with Burawoy (2009a: 457) that some of the critics who point to his putative Marxism in order to attack his model as a whole engage in ad hominem attacks without providing any empirical data to suggest how this affiliation has maligned Burawoy's model for public sociology. Of course some have argued that critical sociology is not critical enough, and that the notion of public sociology is at best a "transitional measure" (Aronowitz 2005: 336) towards a sociology with less servitude towards power interests (see also Acker 2005; Brewer 2005).

simultaneously facilitates dialogue while promoting professional sociology (2005: 413).[4] If interpretive sociologists, including those practicing ethnography as well as constructionism, wish to make their research salient to publics, an inclusive model of professional sociology must be culled which includes—*of equal importance*—both normative and interpretive elements.

Engaging the constructionist imagination of publics presents a series of challenges. In what follows I explore these challenges and attempt to move beyond them by offering an alternative in the form of a constructionist public sociology.

Inspiring Constructionist Imaginations by Orienting Awareness Contexts

The major threat to any sociologist who wishes to address publics is the dilution, distortion, and usurpation of sociological insights to service specific policy and political goals and agendas. Some express concern regarding the inability of sociological knowledge to translate within other institutional contexts such as mass media, government and law (Ericson 2005). Where such communication is feasible, sociologists may lose "autonomy and influence as the analysis translates into the criteria of relevance and communication logic of the institution concerned" (Ericson 2005: 365; see also Beck 2005: 337). Moreover, as with others quoted above, Ericson argues that such pressures stymie the ability for sociologists to "[advance] …scientific knowledge" (2005: 370). One of the most striking exemplars of the challenges facing public sociologists is provided by Stacey (2004). Stacey tried to remain non-partisan during the presentation of her research on the effects of "lesbigay parenthood" (2004: 134) to various publics. However, she found her research annexed and reframed by conservative sociologists, an Attorney General and—perhaps most ironically—by a 'left wing' gay and lesbian news magazine alike. Each, in differing ways, distorted her research into sociological soundbites that molded her analysis into "prefabricated frame[s]" (2004: 135). For instance, Stacey was under pressure to defend her qualitative analysis against a conservative family sociologist's quantitative research as well as an Attorney General's insistence on 'scientific' evidence, and felt pushed to defend her research in "positivist terms" (2004: 138).

Carrington's (2002) experience as a witness subpoenaed by the Police Integrity Commission of New South Wales, Australia was, unfortunately, similarly excruciating. Carrington, a crimino-legal scholar drawing from critical feminist studies had written articles, and presented at conferences about the case of a 14-year-old female Australian teenager, Leigh Leigh, who was murdered by a group of her peers while attending a beach party. Her research aim, she later wrote, was not to "'unearth' or 'uncover' any hidden, master or singular 'truth' about this crime, nor to produce any definitive account about it, but to demonstrate how this event, like all events, is subject to multiple discursive readings, re-readings and representations some of

[4] Vaughan's insights are especially ironic considering Burawoy's own affiliation with ethnography. His dissertation was an ethnography which was later published as his book *Manufacturing Consent: Changes in the Labor Process under Monopoly Capitalism* (1979). He has continued to pursue ethnographic research up to the present (1985; 1992; 2009b), and has contributed theoretical advances to ethnography as well (2003). Burawoy's empirical sociological work has been and continues to be historical and ethnographic, yet his theoretical model of public sociology is far more normative.

which are more or less accurate than others, but how some are the products of 'legal fictions'." The maternal family of Leigh Leigh, who had become aware of Carrington's research, contacted her, and long-term ties between them were established. Carrington's interactions with the Leigh family led directly to her feeling, she says "somewhat naively, …a responsibility to contest the production of a number of legal fictions associated with the case." Her cross-examination on trial glaringly evidenced an androcentrically oriented legal iron cage that expected her academic knowledge to be aligned with a positive-legal epistemology. The point of the trial was to ascertain the 'truth' of events related to the Leigh case, and Carrington's accusation that the law was not necessarily equated with justice fell on deaf ears. Refusing to answer questions in black and white terms, Carrington was accused of spouting "rubbish" and "absolute nonsense," and (perhaps a greater threat for female public sociologists) of being too "emotional."

Joel Best (2004) offers additional insights into the challenges facing sociologists who choose to address various publics. The public, he argues, only cares about receiving answers to "straightforward empirical questions" that are directly related to the everyday lives of people (2004: 157). He provides several suggestions sociologists may follow in writing articles for public consumption (a form of traditional public sociology). For instance, sociologists must be "prepared to repackage" articles they write for "broader consumption," keep these articles short—the shorter the better—and render the articles "compelling" (2004: 157, 158). Sociologists should expect trade-offs for engaging the public in this way, but these are necessary sacrifices, Best argues, if sociologists want to reach a broader audience (2004: 157).

Best's suggestions are pragmatic and obviously come from experience. Yet constructionism has the potential to advance a *reflexive*, *dialogic knowledge base* that may serve to *orient* the publics it addresses towards constructionist insights, eliciting and exciting a constructionist imagination in the process (cf. Mills 1959). To foster such a dialogue requires that constructionists have faith that particular publics will welcome constructionist insights, and who are not willing to dilute and contort their analyses into sociological infotainment *prior to* interaction with these publics. Such sound-bite packaging anticipates, and in the process reifies, publics who do not care for sociology and have no interest in fostering a constructionist imagination. Such trepidation is unwarranted; it is the product of assumptions regarding public levels of sociological awareness as well as disciplinary low self-esteem.

Constructionists should aim to orient the awareness contexts of the publics they engage. Glaser and Strauss (1964) originally formulated the concept of awareness contexts, referring to the various levels of awareness interactants may or may not have about each other within particular interactional contexts. I offer an ostensibly radical interpretation. Rather than being charged with examining awareness contexts per se, constructionists may opt to direct, through a mutually constitutive dialogue, the awareness contexts of publics towards a greater affinity and appreciation of the interpretive processes of sociality. Glaser and Strauss were interested in several ways awareness contexts could be empirically assessed, including the effects of changing awareness contexts upon the identity of a participant (1964: 678). They also observed that people representing organized systems have stakes in particular types of awareness contexts (1964: 679). In order to transmit constructionist insights that are not *as* susceptible to dilution and distortion, constructionists must be prepared to recognize

sociology as an organized system with a stake invested in this transmission. They must be willing to go public and invest in constructionist stock.

If the goal for public sociology is to move away from its traditional form, social constructionism is an apt catalyst for inspiring the constructionist imagination of various publics. Furedi (2009: 179) recognizes the importance of fostering a sociological imagination for publics given the dominance (at least within occidental contexts) of atomization and hyper-individuation. This atomization, fused under the twin social forces of neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism, has led to individualized formulations of social problems that fail to illuminate the social forces that undergird them. Constructionism offers neither a validation nor an undermining of social problems but an exploration of the social processes that mediate their constitution and the points of social assemblage that affect their permutations.

Recent writings on the potential benefits of 'applied constructionism' as well as 'applied interactionism' have explored the potential of applying constructionist scholarship with particular public groups and institutions. The initial formulation of an 'applied symbolic interactionism' made by Zurcher (1986; see also Dunn and Cardwell 1986) has led to the perspective being applied and promulgated within the field of social work (Forte 2003, 2004a, b). Forte (2004a: 391) asserts that awareness of interactionist theory and epistemology helps to make practitioners aware of processes such as labeling in order to avoid stigmatizing clients, as well as explore meanings of "undervalued groups" and address issues of intense emotionality (2004a: 393). He points to a number of areas within social work which he argues has benefitted from awareness of interactionism, including human behavior theory, social work practice, social problem analysis, social work research and policy advocacy (2004b: 528). Research which promulgates a constructionist framework has also been directed at practitioners (Atherton 1993; Franklin 1995). Recent formulations of an 'applied constructionism' emphasize reflexivity and the interconnections between sociological theories and practice (Miller 2003; Miller and Fox 1999). Miller and Fox (1999: 55–56) refer to social constructionist "work" performed by "nonacademic social constructionist practitioners" as "applied constructionism." They argue that academically-oriented constructionists need to broaden their horizons to "recognize and include applied uses of constructionist assumptions and principles" (1999: 54). In this manner social constructionism may become linked to "intervention strategies" which impact upon the 'real' lived experience of people, and may lead to the formation of collaborations between academics and practitioners and possibly the development "social action agendas" with an eye towards social change (1999: 56, 57). The potential of such collaborations to cull organic public sociological arenas and orient awareness contexts is high. Yet advocates of applied constructionism or applied interactionism have yet to engage specifically with the public sociology debates inspired by Burawoy. This may indicate the irony that practitioners are so busy applying sociological insights that they have little time to digest and respond, academically, to the public sociology debates. Nevertheless, such a rejoinder would be welcome.

The challenge remains how to approach publics in a way that fosters a reflexive dialogue that remains here an ideal type. In the following section I focus on some of these challenges, drawing on my research examining Canadian youth crime debates.

Distortion and Dilution: Challenges to Organic Public Sociology in Canada

Constructionists have recently turned to studying youth crime (Spencer 2005; Adorjan 2011; Spencer 2011). Rather than seeking to answer normative criminological questions, such as whether or not youth crime rates are 'actually' rising or falling, these analyses explore the social problems process targeting points of contention over young offender identity and culpability. Such analyses rarely garner media attention. Indeed, it is challenging enough presenting 'objective' youth crime information to media outlets. In one Canadian newspaper article titled "A ticking crime bomb", sociologist Rosemary Gartner (affiliated with the Centre of Criminology at the University of Toronto) comments on the highly publicized case of Reena Virk, who at 14 was murdered in British Columbia by a group of teenagers. Gartner refers to the relatively small average number of youths in Canada (48) who murder every year: "not that 25 more lives should be trivialized, but that, to me, is not the *basis* on which we restructure a criminal justice system …My concern is that public policy is in danger of being driven by emotional reactions" (McGovern 23 Feb 1998, my emphasis). Within the article is a picture of what appears to be a mother and daughter leaving flowers at a memorial for Virk, with Virk pictured within an embedded photo. Below the picture is a caption which distorts Gartner's statement in the article: "leaving flowers in memory of victim Virk (inset): '25 lives are not *worth* restructuring the system'" (my emphasis). Gartner's response may not differ from many sociologists asked by the media to comment on such a case. She is careful not to "trivialize" the horrific nature of the crime, but counsels—carefully—against hysteria by suggesting that changing youth justice policy is premature. Nevertheless, the editors of the *Alberta Report* replace her word "basis" with the more emotionally charged "worth" underneath the picture.

The *Alberta Report* can be considered a 'popular' paper, which is "simple in structure and colloquial in its use of vocabulary, and (which) gives more emphasis to emotive …understanding" (Ericson et al. 1991: 39). Likely anticipating reader anger and concerned about the article's marketability, *Alberta Report* editors placed the distorted quote at a location that draws the eye from headline to pictorial. Such practices warn sociologists loud and clear: 'Let the buyer of sociological publicity beware!'

I asked some Canadian criminologists about how they respond to media inquiries about their research. One criminologist said that she will pick up the phone to answer requests for interviews from the (relatively conservative) *Canadian Broadcast Corporation*, but if it is a journalist from the *Toronto Star* newspaper, she will answer only "if it's certain people" (Personal Communication, July 10, 2007). If she receives a call from the *Toronto Sun* (a relatively more 'popular, newstainment' oriented paper), she "won't even bother calling back, since you know no matter what you say it's going to have a particular bent—it's the nature of the newspaper." Familiarity with specific journalists can help academics gauge in advance whether or not to risk providing an interview. To counteract journalistic pressures to spin sociology (see Stacey 2004: 141), this criminologist suggested that scholars may opt to write their own oped pieces in order to control their message, as opposed to being (mis)quoted as one of many sources within an article. "I think that's a better way of communicating the ideas, than speaking to reporters," she says, "but there's no merit for that in

academics." Only those who "feel really passionately about an issue or really strongly about an issue" put uncredited time into newspaper reports.[5] She went on to state that when an academic (criminologist) is approaching a reporter,

> if you're smart about it and savvy with the media you know exactly what you want to say, and you say that no matter what the question is and you say it four times, forwards backwards and you make sure that it's in a soundbite and that it's in a nice short sharp seven-word sentence so that it ends up being quoted. So 'the probability or likelihood of recidivism for those on parole is low'—you just keep saying it over and over and over and over again.

Another criminologist expressed frustration at answering reporters who are convinced that youth crime is more violent today than in the past: "I just get tired answering this to media …you know I don't know how to argue this 'well that's not what I remember' well I don't remember this and you don't remember that so what do we do; well …that's what numbers are for" (Personal Communication, June 12, 2007). Engaging in research that raises questions about levels of youth crime, which provides objective responses and which addresses public fears is important. Journalists are curious about the same questions as many publics, such as what is 'really going on' regarding youth crime. The challenges facing sociologists and criminologists who seek to communicate such information to publics remain numerous.

It may be an even greater challenge, therefore, for constructionists to take their studies exploring ambiguity and complexity and try to present these studies to publics without substantial distortion and dilution. Yet this challenge may be attenuated by nurturing the reflexive dialogue Burawoy has advocated in his model of organic public sociology, and which I argue can cultivate a constructionist imagination. The reason many sociologists and criminologists are so reticent to engage publics is that they are still grappling with a unidirectional 'traditional' public sociology.

Despite the challenges facing Canadian public sociology, engaging in 'organic' public sociology amenable to constructionist approaches *may* even be easier to foster in Canada than the U.S. This remains a fruitful area for further empirical research. Both critical sociology (including Marxism and feminism) and policy sociology are relatively strong in Canada, while professional and public sociology, compared with the U.S., remains "relatively undeveloped" (McLaughlin et al. 2005: 147). Canada boasts a strong feminist sociology that has a stronger critical component linked to social change versus feminism within the U.S. (Creese et al. 2009; Eichler 2002). Additionally, Canada supports an "indigenous tradition of qualitative research" and an emphasis on historical studies of contemporary society (McLaughlin 2005: 3). Without overstating the internal cohesion of Anglo-Canadian sociology, it seems to effectively balance historical-comparative, interpretive as well as multivariate approaches (McLaughlin 2005: 30).

[5] Others who have addressed the public sociology debates have also pointed to the problem of public sociology lying outside of formal accreditation and legitimation. Doing public sociology in earnest requires so much time that many sociologists, especially young untenured scholars building up a CV feel pressed towards professional sociology (see Brady 2004: 1632; Noy 2009). I would count myself among them! Whether or not public sociology takes on a constructionist form, this issue is perhaps one of the more prescient ones to address.

This is not to say, of course, that there are no internal tensions in Canada regarding the proper direction sociology should go. Organic public sociology may also be difficult to foster in a Canadian context where "the traditional elite public intellectual role is dominated by old fashioned 'Tory' oriented scholars in the humanities, as well as philosophers and scholars from other disciplines" (McLaughlin et al. 2005: 148). Davies (2009) points to the rise of Marxist and "antipositivist" social theory during the 1980s in Canada to suggest that an "intellectual separatism" in Canada between mainstream and critical approaches may lead to an institutional arrangement of "stable nonintegration" (2009: 642, 643). Among other potential scenarios, however, is "reintegration through reconciliation or evolution," where the public sociologist would act as a "bridge-builder" (2009: 645). A promising area of research would be to compare and contrast institutional arrangements between Canada and the U.S. that may enable and/or prohibit the development of organic public sociology—especially the variety that may serve to support constructionist research.

Nevertheless, the same characterization of the public sociology debates in Canada (as polarized between mainstream and critical approaches) signals the absence of constructionist participation in Canadian debates over public sociology, imitating the pattern found in the U.S. and elsewhere. Social constructionists (and other 'interpretive' sociologists) remain absent within a recent Canadian Journal of Sociology issue (2009) dedicated to the analysis of public sociology in Canada. The potential contribution of constructionist rejoinders to this debate would be a bridge-building middle ground that offers an alternative been juxtaposed points along the mainstream/insular and critical/activist spectrum.

Sketching a Constructionist Public Sociology Centered on Addressing Youth Crime

Some speculation about what a constructionist public sociology may look like may be useful in anticipating potential issues, especially given the challenges faced by some scholars of youth crime in Canada. There are a number of potentially fruitful methods to maintain a reflexive, organic dialogue with publics. Just as Vaughan (2005: 413) found that *repetition* of sociological concepts linked to her ethnographic analysis helped to foster the sociological imagination of NASA, I believe that over time, constructionist insights may be effectively communicated through *proactive* interactional ventures. The key to promoting successful reflexively-geared interactions lies in identifying groups and organizations that have the potential (if not at the outset) of finding value in the insights gleaned from constructionist research. One area to begin is cyberspace, which offers many promising avenues for securing interactional arenas with publics (Kowalchuk and McLaughlin 2009: 699). Rather than a unidirectional 'black hole', the sheer variety of blogs, zines and wikis offer many dialectical inroads for all manner of sociological approaches to develop interaction with publics (that possess the class-knowledge to access such technology). Some sociology journals have set up twitter profiles. For instance Sociology Compass 'tweets' under 'SociologyLens' (2,033 following; 2,553 followers). The twitter account 'DailySociology' (0 following; 900 followers) sports a bio "introducing sociology to its people." Some sociology departments have twitter profiles as well, such as Stanford University

(SOCatStanford) (0 following; 182 followers). Although Burawoy (2009c: 875) refers to the Internet as a form of traditional public sociology, the ability for mutually constitutive dialogues across cyberspace suggests potential for organic sociological germination. A more organized cyberspace presence on the part of sociologists generally, and constructionists specifically, may help to carve a proactive path towards the publics sociologists wish to reach (see for example Colin Sumner's e-zine/blog Crimetalk at http://www.crimetalk.org.uk).

Organizations and groups approached by scholars wishing to establish links may find such an interactive and inviting web presence facilitates knowledge about researchers and the type of knowledge explored by constructionist scholars in particular. It may also be useful to envision initial organic public sociology contact to be established through a group of like-minded scholars, rather than a 'lone wolf'. A research team would help promulgate a multi-vocality group dynamic that would dampen the monological tendencies of single-researcher to group interactions. This also encourages competing views both among a team of scholars and the groups they work with to be voiced.

Initial meetings may likely be geared to establish a base of understanding: e.g. that one is present to build a long-term relationship and coordinated dialogue instead of being a 'hired gun' geared to answering policy-related questions. No doubt this issue will become particularly salient as time goes on. It is likely that even where groups welcome constructionist presentations and workshops to begin with, they will eventually want a 'return' on their 'investment'. Nevertheless, the point here is to raise awareness of the value of conducting constructionist research that seeks to explore different questions, for instance regarding representations and 'claims-making' activities and how these are taken up and responded to.

It is up for debate whether constructionists should spend time introducing core concepts such as 'claims-making', let alone 'ontological gerrymandering', or more general criminological concepts such as 'penal populism' and 'yellow journalism' (e.g. to groups of journalists, youth probation officers or politicians involved with juvenile jurisprudence). My own feeling is that using specialized discourse only reifies the position of sociologist as expert dictating knowledge unidirectionally. What matters here is charisma and selling the constructionist imagination, not using specialized terminology culled within the ivory tower. Moreover, an effective organic public sociology is not instilled by lifting lectures designed for the classroom, be it for undergraduate or graduate students. The particular audience and exigencies related to communicating with that audience must always be on the forefront of consideration. So it may well be natural that building ties with groups requires a deep understanding of the lived experiences faced in everyday life by these groups.

Related to my own academic work, I can imagine establishing links with groups such as youth probation officers and social workers, police involved with young offenders, politicians addressing concerns of youth crime by members of their constituencies as well as journalists who report on youth crime. As mentioned, the expectation that such practitioners will want to know how constructionist insights would be practical and applicable and translate into policy should be anticipated. Initial presentations and workshops may be given that illuminate one's research. My own research examining both representations and responses to youth crime in Canada involves addressing the identity politics involved in youth crime debates; i.e. whether

wayward youth are represented as kids or cons, involving public perceptions of the groups identified above as well as statements within the media and reports from those groups as well. Not focused on answering questions such as effective methods of policing young offenders, nor the impact of particular probation policies, such a focus widens the lens of analysis and, when presenting on claims-making activities by particular claims-makers *to the claims-makers themselves*, a mirror is held up through which groups are encouraged to cogitate over not only how they are perceived from multiple perspectives, but how their actions may or may not impact upon these perspectives. This mirror is two-sided. The researcher (or better, research team) should ideally gain insights from perceiving how their knowledge is received by particular groups and gain knowledge regarding the presentation of a 'public sociological self'. The limits to the malleability of the researcher's standpoint is a debatable point. Confidence and faith in the potential insights from constructionist analyses should not give way to 'ready mix' policy-oriented recommendations. Just as Vaughan (2005) found that NASA appreciated the insights of her 'thick' ethnographic analysis of organizational practices, constructionist scholars require some measure of trust that their knowledge will not be appropriated in deleterious ways.

This of course leaves open important questions regarding what is an appropriate and 'ethical'-'moral' application of constructionist scholarship. Indeed, whether it is appropriate to present research conducted with a view to value neutrality to those who may use it in ways the research did not intend. It is certainly possible that some more conservatively minded sociologists would welcome their insights used to undergird calls to 'get tough' on youth crime (especially in Canada where there is currently heated debate over a new draconian omnibus crime bill introduced by the Conservative government, which includes penal populist measures addressing youth crime). Moreover, practitioners may not initially appreciate their own role regarding, for instance rising levels of penal populism and 'law and order' campaigns against youth crime. It is important to underscore here that a paradigm-shifting and 'consciousness raising' effect is unlikely to occur through one presentation, workshop, focus group, or other relatable meeting of minds. It is only over an extended period of time that trust and empathy may be effectively established, and the likelihood of distorted appropriation reduced. Raising awareness over the socio-political context within which individuals and organizations operate is challenging work yet requires far more time than the more distanced and unidirectional efforts of traditional public sociology. In a large way, then, a constructionist public sociology is geared to illuminating social context, promulgating critical reflection, and even providing 'replacement discourses' that offer alternative lines of action.

Kenneth Gergen's (2001) discussion of developing a 'relational politics' is useful here. He writes "rather than generating knowledge that may or may not be used by those making decisions for the society—as the pure scientists envisioned their goal—the knowledge generating process becomes itself a means of creating the good society" (p. 170). As in the notion of replacement discourses, a "symbiotic" dialogue may eventually yield productive results, as it "moves from a symbiotic to a productive posture—from deconstruction to reconstruction" (p. 175). During my volunteer work as a youth probation officer I found fascinating how some probation officers would use the term 'client' when referring to the youths they supervised, while others preferred 'my kids'. I had the impression that there was no organizational or

collective sense of these very disparate and competing views. An effective constructionist-organic public sociology would help raise awareness of these representations and the potential impacts they yield (see Kelly and Khosrow, this volume, for a more detailed and empirical explication of the processes and challenges of engagement with a very different group: environmental engineers).

Ongoing Challenges: Disciplinary Coherence and Addressing 'Publics'

Whatever the challenges of long-term and reflexive engagement with particular groups, two related challenges remain: sociology's disciplinary coherence and the problematization of 'public'. Some have responded to the public sociology debates by suggesting that sociology is "not symbolically unified" and has trouble establishing the proper focus for its subject matter, including the "proper mode of theorizing" (Turner 2006: 25–26). Boyns and Fletcher (2005: 6) argue that sociology is suffering an "identity crisis" where "we do not, ourselves, seem to know who we are." The problems of "disciplinary incoherence" and "multivocality" must first be resolved, they argue, before public sociology can become effective (2005: 14). Put too cynically, Noy (2009) feels that "sociologists generally recognize that we are irrelevant," and that the public sociology debates have drawn sociology "deeper into a self-referential quagmire." He also calls for the transcendence of internal and intra-departmental divisiveness before institutional support structures for public sociology can be instilled.

Yet sociological multivocality may well prove to be a strength rather than weakness, especially within the Canadian context. Moreover, interpretive approaches derive strength not through refining the 'proper' mode of theorizing but through their analytical insights and potential germination of a publics' sociological imagination. Furthermore, constructionists should seriously consider what challenges are posed with respect to being 'on the sidelines' during the course of research and remaining there during its dissemination to public markets. I argue that there is much potential in distinguishing between these two phases of research, especially if constructionists choose to broaden their audience outside of academia.

A related problem is the issue of what we mean by the term 'public' (for a constructionist analysis of Burawoy's references to publics see Christensen 2012). I have used the plural 'publics' in order to suggest the variegated nature of public markets and their complexities which sociologists must consider before engaging in public sociology. Nichols (2009), within an imagined conversation between Sorokin and Burawoy, suggests from Sorokin's perspective that Burawoy's notion of public is vague. Burawoy's imagined rejoinder has him respond that despite the concept not being precise it may be the best one can do for the time being, serving as a "sensitizing concept," not a strict definition (2009: 42, 43). Constructionists should engage in such a sensitizing project to explore which publics may be most amenable to considering the ambiguities and interpretive dynamics explored within constructionist studies, and which may not be. The question of audience must be treated as a key researchable variable (McLaughlin et al. 2005: 147). This project would also consider which 'types' of sociology could be effectively disseminated to receptive publics. There can be no doubt that many publics will continue to demand

sociological soundbites and objective assessments of social problems. 'Positive' sociological knowledge may have a natural elective affinity within these publics. Significantly, however, some publics that may initially desire normative sociological knowledge may be conditioned, over time, to desire the interpretive insights gained from extended contact with constructionist scholars.

The question becomes empirical: we need to study which publics are most apt to be amenable to 'traditional' and/or 'organic' public sociology. We need to ask "which publics do sociologists want to advance," (Sprague and Laube 2009: 252; see also Mayrl and Westbrook 2009: 155) but also which publics would be most amenable to *interpretive* sociological insights, given the potential to establish open and reflexive dialogue. Moreover, we need to explore how organic public sociology can potentially transform awareness contexts in such a way that formerly unidirectional/traditional dialogue *becomes* dialectical.

If constructionists decide to take this direction, they should feel comfortable being an 'expert' to the publics they engage—this is an unavoidable aspect of public sociology. Constructionists are 'experts' regarding the *sociological processes* associated with social problems formulations. Significantly, I believe sociologists routinely under-estimate the ability of publics to appreciate the often complex forms of knowledge that emerges from interpretive approaches within sociology. We may only know this by taking the initiative to cull constructionist imaginations.

There are risks for constructionists who choose to approach publics in order to establish a dialogue. No one can be certain how publics will take up constructionist insights. Stakeholders within social problems debates may welcome constructionist insights in order to construct their positions more robustly. Constructionists who attempt to remain on the 'sidelines' when approaching publics, with a value-neutral ideal in mind, should not be surprised by either liberal or conservative usurpation of their insights (Stacey 2004). The issue of which publics are least likely to dilute and distort constructionist analyses is important to explore, though we should not be surprised when we initially only find 'devils we know' out there: publics who will invariably usurp knowledge for their own interests but do so in a way that minimizes ideological spin doctoring. Perhaps there are even a few who will embrace knowledge for knowledge's sake. A related concern may be that coming too far away from professional sociology, sociologists become more explicitly activists and besmirch their professional credentials (Etzioni 2005: 375), or simply become ideologues no longer concerned with value neutral analysis. The challenge is to retain one's master status as a researcher, openly and explicitly, despite other roles, such as advocacy, being taken on during interactions with publics (Dunn 2001: 290).

It seems to me that the single greatest factor with respect to whether or not sociologists wish to engage public sociology is quite simply whether or not they are optimistic or pessimistic about the project. Constructionists, as well as symbolic interactionists and ethnomethodologists, have remained silent during these debates. Besides the likelihood that many simply have ignored the debates over public sociology, I am led to the conclusion that many sociologists have become cynical about publics' willingness and ability to embrace a sociological imagination towards social problems. There is the presumption that *all* publics demand "pronouncements of truth" and do not appeal to "wishy-washy statements" (Glenn 2009: 143). Despite presenting a false dichotomy, commentators on public sociology seem to accept this

as fact and focus upon ways to effectively market prepackaged sociological knowledge. This runs the risk of sociology devolving into a 'pop' doppelganger, where sociologists place their energies proactively into the best strategies to minimize the dilution of their knowledge. Yet a problematization of audience and more empirical research geared to assessing publics may tell us where a constructionist, organic public sociology can be most efficaciously instilled.

Academic constructionism is far less inclined towards activism than critical sociology, yet maintains an alternative to Burawoy's conceptualization of professional sociology. While there are risks involved, constructionism offers to publics a tempered presentation of sociological insights that is an alternative to both normative and ideologically infused sociological forms. It has the potential to inspire constructionist imaginations and shape publics in the process. It is therefore a risk worth taking; remaining silent risks too much.

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