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A  
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and to challenge  
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## STUDYING EQUALITY/INEQUALITY:

Naturalist and Constructionist  
Approaches to Equality in Marriage

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*This article compares naturalist and constructionist approaches to the qualitative study of equality and inequality, and encourages more ethnographers to adopt the latter. Focusing on the subfield of marital equality, three areas of divergence are explored: sampling, interviewing, and the analysis and presentation of data. In each area, naturalists tend to obscure the diversity and complexity of respondents' interpretations. The constructionist alternative is to make storytelling paramount by treating equality and inequality as situated narrative accomplishments. A constructionist approach focuses on respondents' own ethnographic skills while still fitting "the data" into a larger analytic story about equality.*

**Keywords:** *constructionism; equality; marriage; qualitative methods*

**T**his article is part of an ongoing effort to develop an interactionist, social constructionist approach to the study of equality (Harris 1997, 2000a, 2000b, 2001). My argument is this: While many sociologists do research and theoretical work on equality, they tend to do so in ways that privilege their own viewpoints on the subject. Traditional scholarly practices—implicitly or explicitly defining equality, identifying and decrying inequalities, and studying the variables associated with equality and inequality—all tend to set boundaries around what the concept may mean. What's missing is an approach that treats the concept as a topic not a resource (Zimmerman and Pollner 1970), an approach that is acutely sensitive to the diverse meanings equality may have (Strauss 1995) as well as how those meanings are embedded in particular interactive projects and circumstances (Gubrium and Holstein 1995). People themselves have stories to tell about the equalities and inequalities in their lives, stories that are potentially as intricate and interesting as the ones scholars tell. Both sets of stories are, of course, not pure reflections of reality but are creative renditions (see Maines 1993; Maines and Ulmer 1993). Nothing is inherently equal or unequal exactly as someone explains it. From an interactionist perspective, though, it is more important to study the equality "objects" (Blumer 1969) that exist in the worlds of people, because it is likely those objects (not scholars' objects) that most directly

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inform people's actions. That requires respecting and studying the equality stories that people live by, the interpretive process of assembling the stories, as well as the "going concerns" that occasion the stories (see Gubrium and Holstein 2000).

As I have attempted to articulate and justify a constructionist approach to equality and inequality, I have tried to extend the theoretical perspective of symbolic interactionism (Blumer 1969) by incorporating complementary insights from phenomenology (Schutz 1964), ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967; Pollner 1987), Dewey's (1989) ethical theory, and Gubrium and Holstein's (1998, 2000) treatment of narrative practice. Focusing my substantive concerns in the area of equality in marriage, I have already reviewed the quantitative literature in that area (Harris 2000a). My close reading suggested that scholars have proposed a wide array of methodological procedures (scales, codes, etc.) for identifying marital equality. These procedures are idiosyncratic in that they are discontinuous between researchers; more important, the procedures are probably highly divergent from the way most married people interpret the state of equality in their own marriages—which is what a constructionist approach focuses on.

In this article, I will further distinguish traditional and constructionist approaches to the study of equality—accentuating the positive contributions that the latter can make—by critiquing qualitative research on marital equality. Much of this literature can be characterized as "naturalist" (Gubrium and Holstein 1997). While personal stories are highlighted more in qualitative than in quantitative research, there has still been an underappreciation of married persons as narrators or ethnographers of their own lives (Gubrium and Holstein 1995). Consequently, the adoption of a more constructionist viewpoint has important methodological ramifications even for qualitative researchers of marital equality. Moreover, ethnographic and interactionist scholars should also be able to derive from this review useful ideas for studying equality and inequality in *any* area of social life.

### **NATURALISM, SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM, AND NARRATIVE ANALYSIS**

In narrowing down the literature that I review here, I have relied on the common categories of "quantitative" and "qualitative" research.

This distinction is a loose one. If taken for granted, the quantitative/qualitative dichotomy can conceal continuities *between* as well as internal variation *within* the two “camps.” It is the latter methodological nuance that I focus on in this article. The mere usage of a similar qualitative technique (such as interviewing or participant observation) does not necessarily make scholars equivalent “qualitative researchers.” Scholars’ particular analytical orientations may be as consequential for the findings that they create as the particular methodological procedure that they use. Background assumptions shape not just the selection of technique; they color the way any particular method is employed and the manner in which the findings are worked up. Theoretical language and methodological practice contribute together to the discoveries that we make (Gubrium and Holstein 1997; Richardson 1990).

Of the many different perspectives qualitative researchers can adopt, two major options are naturalism and constructionism (Gubrium and Holstein 1997). Naturalism aims to document lived realities—beliefs, behaviors, dilemmas, strategies, and so on—without questioning the facticity of the world. Firsthand observation and in-depth interviewing are viewed as procedures that can be used to try to capture the real experiences of individuals and groups. Although naturalists may acknowledge that people can interpret things differently, these variations in meaning are merely one feature to document among the numerous features of social worlds. When interpretive differences are noticed, it is the researcher’s task to resolve discrepancies and incorporate the informants’ divergent stories into some larger explanatory and descriptive scheme (Gubrium and Holstein 1997). Naturalists aim to create a well-integrated text that exposes myths and accurately conveys what is going on (see also Atkinson and Coffey 2002).

Constructionists, in contrast, take less for granted. They treat the meaning of things *in general* as indeterminate. Constructionist approaches, especially phenomenology (Schutz 1970; Maso 2001) and ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967; Pollner and Emerson 2001), attempt to place more, if not all, of the world in brackets. Schutz, for example, suggests it is possible to suspend “all the common-sense judgments of our daily life about the world out there” when making phenomenological inquiries (pp. 58-9). Garfinkel, in turn, recommends treating “every reference to the ‘real world’” as a reference to a locally produced phenomenon (p. vii). By so doing, even simple descriptions of a “public school” and its “teachers,” “desks,” “students,” and “cliques”

can be considered creative interpretive feats rather than reports of reality. It is people's sense-making practices that bring a knowable world into being (Pollner 1987). For qualitative scholars with these sensibilities, social order and social facts are treated as human accomplishments, and the resulting program is to study *how* the accomplishing takes place *indigenously*, while recognizing that one's own research practices play an active role in constituting "the field" under study (Pollner 1991; Pollner and Emerson 2001).

As tends to be the case with dichotomies, there is no absolute separation between naturalist and constructionist inquiry. Similarities do exist. For example, both naturalism and constructionism aim to be more sensitive to people's actual experiences than quantitative research. Both approaches advocate the detailed study of interaction and meaning. And, both approaches make some assumptions about what is "out there" in the real world. Even "strict" constructionists cannot bracket everything, try as they might to leave all definitional activity to the individuals they study (Best 1993; Woolgar and Pawluch 1985). The difference between naturalists and constructionists can thus be seen as one of degree. As I hope to show in this article, however, the degrees can be quite large and can have profound effects on the findings that two "qualitative scholars" create.<sup>1</sup>

The growth of narrative analysis has further highlighted the distinction between naturalism and constructionism. Of course, personal stories have long been a central concern in qualitative inquiry, but often for their value in assembling a more accurate portrait of a particular person, setting, or group (Gubrium and Holstein 1997; Plummer 2001). In contrast, recent work in narrative treats storytelling as a crucial means of reality construction in its own right. Informants' narratives are now seen as interpretive versions of events rather than as conduits of information about actual realities (Gubrium and Holstein 1995). Scholars in history, anthropology, psychology, communications, and sociology have turned to narrative analysis as a means of understanding how both lay and scholarly tales create order and coherence out of an indeterminate subject matter (Berger 1997; Bjorklund 1998; Bruner 1987; Cortazzi 2001; Cronon 1992; Maines 1993; Ochberg 1994; Ochs and Capps 1996; Polkinghorne 1988; Richardson 1990; Riessman 1993).

Like perspectives (Shibutani 1955), all stories are selective and transformative. Storytellers ignore certain aspects of experience while highlighting those that fit their current way of thinking (Berger 1963);

they *actively* link otherwise ambiguous elements into meaningful patterns (Gubrium and Holstein 1997; Polkinghorne 1988). Narration is a process that is at once dialectical, flexible, and conditioned. It is dialectical in that the meaning of a story theme is shaped by the examples chosen to illustrate it while, simultaneously, the examples derive their sense from the pattern into which they are cast. Narration is flexible in that any given theme can be explicated through a diverse array of experiential particulars, and any single example could be used to illustrate a number of competing themes. This makes storytelling incredibly “artful” (Garfinkel 1967; Gubrium and Holstein 1997). Narration is conditioned, though, because in the social world not just any story will do. Creativity and indeterminacy are circumscribed by certain constraining factors. To be taken seriously, storytellers must be sensitive to their audience, responsive to the social task at hand, and mindful of the formula plot lines sponsored by the local and larger culture (Berger 1997; Bjorklund 1998; Gubrium and Holstein 2000; Loseke 2001).

Just as particular forms of excuses and justifications become socially acceptable in certain milieus (Mills 1940; Scott and Lyman 1968), some plot lines are socially favored over others. These vary by historical and interactional context (Bjorklund 1998; Gubrium and Holstein 2000). Some authorized tales emphasize free will and individual effort. Others point to external constraints in the environment (the economy, demographic trends, peer pressure, spirits, circumstance, coincidence). Still others implicate internal constraints (socialized values, self-esteem, the passions, alcohol, mental illness, demonic possession). Through subtle choice of language, storytellers position themselves as passive or active, victim or aggressor, in their social relations with others (Riessman 2002; see also Hopper 1993; Holstein and Miller 1990; Loseke 2001; Weinberg 2001). In so doing, they tend to align themselves with culturally approved ways of representing social life.

Narrators are not dopes, however (Garfinkel 1967). They are not bound to live by a single coherent narrative. In practice, it is not uncommon for narrators to self-consciously question, revise, and otherwise edit their own stories even as they tell them (Gubrium and Holstein 1998). A realist quantitative or qualitative researcher might try to assess the merits of the various accounts a respondent gives, resolve any discrepancies, and arrive at a more accurate depiction. Constructionist and narrative scholars, on the other hand, would bracket the accounts,

studying how they are put together, the different meanings they convey, and the different consequences they may have.

Like naturalists, constructionists *do* assume license to describe the contexts that they study. However, they do so in a careful, minimalist way. Their appeals to ethnographic authority are more limited than naturalists (Gubrium and Holstein 1999). When constructionists characterize a context, the purpose more likely will be to investigate a situation's impact on interpretive processes (and vice versa), not to unequivocally "set the scene" that purportedly confronts every native member. Thus, a constructionist might incorporate some naturalist observation in order to compare how different institutional settings affect the stories that are told under their respective auspices, but be less inclined to reify those settings (see Weinberg 2001).

### NATURALIST STUDIES OF MARITAL EQUALITY

What are the relevant themes that constitute marital equality? What causal factors promote and inhibit it? To date, qualitative scholars have made it primarily *their* prerogative to answer these questions. There are many books and articles that study marital equality by using a naturalist approach (e.g., Blaisure and Allen 1995; Deutsch 1999; Haas 1980; Hochschild 1989; Knudson-Martin and Mahoney 1998; Risman 1998). Each of them sets forth a conception of what an equal marriage "really" is. These conceptions, however, are not the same. Kimball (1983) and Schwartz (1994) provide the most thorough treatments of the subject. For them, equal marriages tend to have the following characteristics: Both partners share responsibility for breadwinning, housework, and child care; decision-making power is shared equally; communication occurs frequently and is not dominated by either partner; sexual relations are conducted fairly; mutual respect is exhibited; and spouses are best friends who put each other first (Kimball 1983; Schwartz 1994). These are not the only assertions Kimball and Schwartz make about equality, just some of the themes on which there is general agreement.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the criteria highlighted in Kimball's and Schwartz's books are *not* universally endorsed by other qualitative social scientists as the qualifying characteristics of equal marriages. Haas' (1980, 1982) six-part conception of a "completely egalitarian" marriage, for example,

neglects some of the themes (sex and communication) while including others that seem to overlap. Knudson-Martin and Mahoney (1998, 82), in turn, discern only four features of an equal marriage, but introduce even more terminology and categories (such as "accommodation"). A great many scholars, meanwhile, focus primarily on housework and child care in their research on marital equality (Blaisure and Allen 1995; Coltrane 1989; Deutsch 1999; Gerson 1993; Hochschild 1989).

In short, although many qualitative scholars provide very cogent and detailed depictions of marital equality, there is not complete consistency between them regarding the meaning of equality. There is instead a diverse array of competing scholarly definitions. I read this state of affairs as one good reason for turning away from researchers' meanings and toward the definitional activities of social actors. Another more important reason is this: From an interactionist perspective, what is significant about marital equality is not the various stories scholars tell but the stories that people themselves might live by. Even if a particular scholar's conception were deemed the "best" characterization of equality in marriage, many questions would remain. How might the scholar's conception relate to the daily lives of married persons? Do many couples know about it? Do they agree with it? If people think "Here goes my spouse again, treating me like an equal/unequal," what is the specific meaning and context of that interpretation? Which theme are *they* referencing? Is it a theme frequently propounded by a certain scholar? Or, could there be equality issues that are crucial to some married couples but that are entirely missing from the scholar's conception? In either case, how do people complete the intricate work of assembling the raw materials of their lives into coherent narratives about marital equality? On what occasions, and for what purposes? How are their stories told, affirmed, contested, and acted upon?

These are the kinds of questions that a constructionist approach would ask—questions that are different from the concerns of traditional social scientists. They are questions that require humility and curiosity, rather than a confident, outraged, or dogmatic pose (Harris 2000b). To ask them, scholars would have to be willing to listen to discover what equality means to specific persons in particular settings, as well as *how* it means, rather than positing what equality really is or ought to be.

Taking such a constructionist turn would also necessitate a different set of theoretically informed empirical practices. Some guidelines for future research might be helpful. In the following sections of this



article, I discuss some of the ways that a constructionist methodology diverges from the naturalist approach to studying equality. For the sake of clarity, I have organized my remarks around three distinct areas: (1) sampling, (2) interviewing, and (3) analyzing and presenting the data. The issues I discuss, however, overlap. The basic argument running throughout is that constructionist practices are better able to capture something that has been missed: the complexity of people's diverse situated interpretations of equality.

### NATURALIST SAMPLING

A qualitative social scientist who wants to learn about equality in marriage will likely do so by observing, interviewing, and/or interacting with egalitarian spouses. But the first task is finding those spouses. Where might they be located? One approach is to seek them in their presumed "natural habitats." A scholar might believe that some groups are more likely to practice equality in marriage and so tailor his or her sampling strategy accordingly. Feminists may come to mind as persons who may purposefully pursue marital equality. Consequently, the National Organization for Women has been a popular venue for finding egalitarian marriages (Blaisure and Allen 1995; Haas 1980; Kimball 1983). For those scholars who consider parenting essential to equality, research participants might be sought through schools or daycare centers (Deutsch 1999). Another technique that can be used is to run newspaper advertisements or make cold calls with the hope of recruiting potentially qualified people from the general public (e.g., Deutsch 1999; Haas 1980). Or, a scholar may contact couples he or she believes to be egalitarian or inegalitarian based on previous research experiences with them (Schwartz 1994). Whatever the source, once appropriate respondents are found, they can be asked if they know anyone who has a similar marriage (Kimball 1983; Schwartz 1994). In this way, a snowball sample can be formed. Throughout all of these sampling processes, qualitative scholars rely partly on their own ability to locate egalitarianism and partly on participants' ability. Respondents are deemed capable—somewhat—of identifying their own and other marriages as equal or unequal.

The "somewhat" is key and deserves elaboration; it points to an enduring tension in naturalist studies of equality and inequality in marriage. On one hand, qualitative researchers have considered their

research participants to be “expert informants” (Blaisure and Allen 1995, 7). Egalitarian couples in particular are said to have excellent advice to offer because they have succeeded in developing relationships that are “worthy of emulation” (Kimball 1983, ix; Schwartz 1994, 3). On the other hand, some respondents are thought to have better knowledge than others. Consequently, researchers frequently set selection criteria to limit their sample to those who can best speak about marital equality. For example, one qualifying characteristic has been the length of time that couples have been married. Blaisure and Allen (1995) spoke only with couples married more than five years in order to exclude people in the “honeymoon phase” who might have an unrealistic understanding of equality (p. 7). Rosenbluth, Steil, and Whitcomb (1998), in contrast, purposefully sought persons married between one and ten years; their rationale was that younger couples would be *more* sensitive to “each partner’s contributions and rewards” (p. 229). The presence of children at home is another trait that researchers have linked to competence. Risman (1998) and Deutsch (1999) excluded couples who did not have at least one child under eighteen living at home. Other scholars do not use that criterion to disqualify potential recruits (Blaisure and Allen 1995; Haas 1980).

Even respondents with presumed competence-generating traits, however, apparently cannot be trusted to know if they really have an equal or unequal marriage. Naturalists are wary of myths and mistakes (Deutsch 1999; Hochschild 1989). An initial screening device—based on the scholar’s definition of equality—is sometimes used to exclude mistaken individuals or to classify their relationships more accurately. These screening devices also vary by scholar. Deutsch (1999), for example, asked her potential recruits to estimate how parenting duties were split up in their marriages. Haas (1980) asked about housework, employment, child care, and decision making. Risman (1998) asked about the division of household labor, employment, child care, and the overall “fairness” of the marriage. All three authors employed unique strategies for including and (re-)classifying respondents to “maximize the probability of selecting equal sharers who really are equal” (Deutsch 1999, 241).

Whether or not a stringent screening process is used, though, naturalist authors retain the right later on to discount respondents’ inaccurate views. Listen to Schwartz as she explains how she uncovered the real truth about a particular couple by observing them over time:

[Ian and Beryl] certainly consider each other their best friend, and it's hard to imagine that most observers would not agree. But after a long time with them, one comes to a slightly different conclusion. Beryl continually defers to Ian's opinions and almost always ends up capitulating to his argument. . . . There is no doubt they love each other. . . . But when Ian talks about Beryl, his tone is slightly paternalistic. (Schwartz 1994, 50)

Not only may a husband and wife be less equal than they think they are, the opposite may also occur. Hochschild (1989) argues that couples adhering to traditional gender ideologies may be unable to admit to themselves just how equal their marriages really are.

Thus, while married people themselves provide valuable sources of information for naturalists, that information is viewed as potentially biased or misleading. It is ultimately the researcher who must separate fact from fiction to determine if respondents are really equal in practice. It is up to the researcher to decide who is qualified to speak and who among those is deluded.

## NATURALIST INTERVIEWING

Once potentially egalitarian spouses are found, a qualitative scholar must decide how to acquire information about their married lives. To date, the main method of choice has been in-depth interviewing (Blaisure and Allen 1995; Deutsch 1999; Haas 1980; Kimball 1983; Schwartz 1994). In-depth interviewing fits well with the goal of learning from expert informants—those who can convey the hidden realities of marital equality. Naturalist scholars assume that, barring myths and mistakes, couples possess “authentic” knowledge of the “real” state of equality in their marriages. This practice is common among family scholars, who tend to treat household kin as “insiders” with privileged access to the actual happenings of family life (Gubrium and Holstein 1990). What the naturalist conception of interviewing underappreciates is the idea that *all* stories about marital equality are situated productions. All marital profiles are emergent interpretations sensitive to the context at hand, including autobiographical tales told by members of familial relationships (see also Atkinson and Silverman 1997). The research interview is an interactional context, and it is no more a neutral conduit of facts than any other situated social interaction. Like a legal deposition, a marital counseling session, or friendly banter at a party, a

scholarly interview exerts an influence over the stories that people tell about their lives (Holstein and Gubrium 1995).

One of the most obvious ways this occurs is through the prompts researchers use to generate marital storytelling. Succinctly put, naturalist researchers tend to formulate questions that reflect their own conceptions of equality. Whether or not they work from a preset interview guide (Deutsch 1999) or take a less formal approach (Hochschild 1989), researchers encourage respondents to recall biographical instances that might appropriately be incorporated into the themes *the researcher* proposes as important.

Consider the following segments of an interview Gayle Kimball ("G") conducted with one of the couples she interviewed, Barbara ("B") and Slack ("S"). Very early in the interview (Kimball's second question), Kimball raised the subject of housework and then asked more specifically about its presumed subcomponents.

G: I'm interested in how you run your household. I imagine with your youngest being thirteen that you have a lot of driving and taxiing kids around. What are your tasks with the kids and how do you divide those up?

B: Okay, the youngest two are from my previous marriage and they are pretty self-sufficient but we do live in an area without public transportation, and in the winter bicycles are pretty cold to ride around. They each ride school buses so we don't have a school transportation problem. With their social life, we do have transportation duties. Very often the two of us ride together, when taking the kids somewhere, mostly for the company of each other [. . .]<sup>3</sup>

G: What about the things like cooking and shopping?

B: We do both things together too. Weekends are generally relaxed for us. We don't have a very heavy social life. Generally, we do the grocery shopping together on Saturdays [. . .]

G: What about cleaning the house? Washing clothes and all that stuff?

Later in the interview, Kimball again changed the subject. This time she encouraged her respondents to consider their interpersonal conflicts and how they resolve them.

G: People talk about the need for communication skills in a relationship. Do you ever have those times when you get irritated with each other, resentful about the toothpaste in the basin or whatever? If so, how do you deal with those little frictions?

B: It's hard to remember when things are going well. (Laughter.) I'm trying to remember back to the last irritation. [. . .]

S: We don't really have very many.

B: Oh, I can think of one. [. . .] When we're both in the bedroom dressing it's an irritation to me when Slack goes out and leaves the door open and the kids are out there. (Kimball 1983, 295-6, 303)

Notice how Kimball's preconceived definition of equality directed the course of the interview. At her prodding, the discussion moved from one issue to another: first housework (childcare, cooking, shopping, and cleaning), then communicating about irritations or frictions. All the while Kimball assumed, instead of inquiring, that these were significant components of equality for the couple. And, given the interactional assignment of responding to these categories, Barbara and Slack graciously searched their biographies and transformed the raw data of past experiences into pertinent examples. The two respondents told brief anecdotes about their lives in relation to the concerns the researcher raised, adopting the researcher's orientation toward married life as consisting of daily "tasks" and "irritations." If there are other issues or ways of thinking about marital equality, they are less likely to arise in such a format or be appreciated if they do.<sup>4</sup>

This is not to say that Kimball utterly controlled the stories that emerged. Far more than in a quantitative survey where responses must be selected from a small set of standardized possibilities, qualitative interviews allow much greater flexibility in the articulation of answers. Respondents might talk virtually about anything. But though the respondent can speak more freely in interviews like Kimball's, naturalists share with quantitative approaches the tendency to view subjects as passively relaying information rather than actively constructing meaning (Holstein and Gubrium 1995). Even for marital scholars interested in "mis-perceptions" of marital equality, interviewing is seen as an effective tool for uncovering those potentially biased thoughts (Deutsch 1999; Hochschild 1989). Survey research and naturalistic interviewing both ignore the interpretive effort it takes to construct coherent life stories. Neither approach treats respondents' narrative skills as noteworthy.

## NATURALIST DATA ANALYSIS

Along with locating potential egalitarians and conducting interviews with them, two other crucial steps for naturalist researchers are to

analyze and present the data. These are complicated affairs. Interview transcripts can generate mountains of pages to look through (let alone any other data). Researchers must shrink the many stories they have heard down to workable size by employing concepts that summarize what they have learned. Based on what their respondents tell them, scholars have attempted to delineate the costs and benefits associated with egalitarianism, the factors that impede or facilitate achieving equality, and the central characteristics of equality (Deutsch 1999; Haas 1980, 1982; Hochschild 1989; Kimball 1983; Knudson-Martin and Mahoney 1998; Risman 1998; Schwartz 1994). Naturalist researchers have tended to collapse the data into those kinds of categories. In the process, they sift and file vast quantities of information, making it more manageable. All of this involves much interpretation, as is sometimes briefly acknowledged (Deutsch 1999, 248). Data so coded can then be used to write sections that are organized by theme and/or by marital couple, and researchers make different choices in this regard. Kimball (1983), Schwartz (1994), and Deutsch (1999) devoted separate chapters to separate issues, such as “resolving conflict” for Kimball, “passion in a sexual democracy” for Schwartz, and “babies, breastfeeding, bonding, and biology” for Deutsch. Hochschild (1989), in contrast, presented her data more in the form of extensive, chapter-length marital profiles permeated by recurrent themes such as “gender strategies.” All of these authors, however, buttressed the validity of the points they made by inserting brief quotations of respondents’ own words.<sup>5</sup>

As with sample selection, data analysis rests firmly on the assumption that respondents are only *somewhat* capable of correctly identifying equality and the conditions associated with it. Scholars express much more confidence about their own abilities to develop and apply concepts that make sense of respondents’ lives; they can tell respondents’ tales more accurately than respondents themselves can. Consider Hochschild’s and Deutsch’s refutations of their respondents’ explanations in favor of their respective scholarly versions:

The Holts said that their upstairs-downstairs arrangement was an equal division of labor. The Delacortes said theirs was unequal. Both stories reflected what the couple *wanted* to believe[, which] clashed with some important reality in their lives, and created a tension. . . . For the Delacortes, the tension was between their joint traditionalism and the reality of both their pocketbooks and their personalities. (Hochschild 1989, 73; emphasis in original)

What this husband describes as a personality difference really reflects their different senses of entitlement. (Deutsch 1999, 68)

Employing a myth/reality distinction is an effective way to present a coherent ethnographic tale about marital equality. Dissonance between researchers' and respondents' accounts can be dismissed if one version is described as delusional or inaccurate. The same procedure can be used when a husband and wife disagree about the state of equality in their own marriage—the researcher merely sides with one or the other person (Deutsch 1999). Even inconsistencies between a single respondent's accounts can be dealt with by averaging them, by endorsing a statement made at one particular time over earlier or later statements, or by persuading the respondent to re-think his or her viewpoint (Deutsch 1999). Conflicting versions of reality are thus subsumed within an orderly, more “factual” account.

And what is the point of the coherent scholarly tale? What is its larger import? Qualitative researchers present their findings not as isolated islands of knowledge but as linked to larger sets of conditions, issues, and concerns. Haas's (1980, 1982) tale is most minimalist, a strictly scientific tale that merely implies the importance of studying, endorsing, and practicing marital equality. Hochschild (1989), in contrast, couches her research in a lengthier historical account about a stalled revolution: women have changed by entering the workforce in greater numbers, but related societal components (workplaces, men, marital norms) have not changed. A dangerous social strain has emerged, as divorce rates indicate; the strain will likely continue unless large-scale social change occurs (Hochschild 1989). Kimball's and Schwartz's stories overlap with Hochschild in some respects but tend to draw more optimistic implications. They extol the 50/50 or peer relationship as a new kind of marriage, possible “for the first time in human history” (Kimball 1983, 1; Schwartz 1994, 43). They emphasize that though it is a rare phenomenon, and something that is difficult to achieve, marital equality *is* feasible. The authors predict that more and more couples will want to have an equal marriage in the future, and will need models to emulate and advice for attaining equality (Kimball 1983; Schwartz 1994). That is what Kimball and Schwartz aim to provide. Their books are cast as contributions toward the achievement of a more just social world: “Learning how best to achieve peer marriage and how to enjoy its fruits



and negotiate its challenges is the next great challenge in our age of equality” (Schwartz 1994, 16; see Kimball 1983, 207-8).

## CONSTRUCTIONISM AND MARITAL EQUALITY

When approaching the subject of equality in marriage, constructionism faces many of the same issues as naturalism. How should research participants be selected? How might interviews be conducted? How should data be interpreted and written up? Not surprisingly, constructionist strategies for dealing with these dilemmas may closely resemble naturalist strategies. For instance, a constructionist and a naturalist researcher may both rely on interview transcriptions and use a literary reporting style that favors quotations over correlation tables. However, there are important differences between the two approaches. Some of the parallel practices can be shown, upon closer inspection, to be only superficially similar. As a result, the research stories that constructionists produce can be highly divergent from the naturalist variety.

## CONSTRUCTIONIST SAMPLING

A constructionist approach to marital equality would make different assumptions about the ontology of equality that would lead to different orientation toward locating “egalitarians” and “inegalitarians.” To start with, equality would be seen as an interpretation, not an entity “out there” waiting to be found in one or another location. For constructionists, equality and inequality come into being when people describe or understand situations in those terms. Consequently, the natural habitat for egalitarianism would not be the gathering places of certain privileged groups, but any setting in which equality is made relevant by some individual or group. In naturalistic research, as I noted above, the goal is to locate *expert informants*—persons who can convey potentially verifiable facts about the inner workings of marital equality. For constructionists, the goal is to locate *expert practitioners*—anybody who can employ the concept of equality to make sense of their everyday lives in a locally comprehensible manner.

Expert practitioners, though skillful in their use of the term *equality*, do not necessarily exhibit extreme self-confidence. On some occasions they may make statements such as “I might be biased, but . . .” or “That’s



my opinion, anyway"; they may even express uncertainty about the "correct" definition of the term *equality*. But those kinds of conversational practices are themselves features of effective storytelling (see Gubrium and Holstein 1998). Part of being an expert practitioner is to sustain intelligibility and pursue objectives even as one doubts one's grasp of the meaning-making tools. The constructionist alternative is thus to look for anybody—however confident—who can and does use the concept of equality, focusing not on the veracity of their interpretations but on how (and for what reasons) those interpretations are assembled.<sup>6</sup>

Competence and accuracy do enter the picture for constructionists, but primarily as members' concerns. As Gubrium and Holstein (1990) have found with family meanings more generally, people themselves propose various criteria for discerning who has the best information. Sometimes people argue that family members have the real facts because they have firsthand knowledge of secret household affairs; other times the argument is that outsiders know best because family members can't see the forest for the trees. Everyday folk, like researchers, make connections between a person's credibility and his or her personal characteristics—such as age, length of time married, employed or not employed, children or no children—just as traditional researchers have done when studying marital equality. There are thus two sets of interpretive processes that constructionists highlight but traditional qualitative approaches overlook: making, justifying, and countering *claims* about marital equality, and making, justifying, and countering assertions about *claimants*. In this sense, assigning competence changes from a researcher's prerogative to practitioners' ongoing practical task.

Still, even though a constructionist approach requires treating *anyone* who can relate the concept of marital equality to concrete experience as competent enough to be taken seriously in research, the knotty question remains: Whose stories should be heard? NOW would certainly be a legitimate organization from which to recruit storytellers, but no more so than any other group that exhibited concern over marital equality. While constructionist theory in itself cannot tell researchers whose stories should be sought out, it can encourage us to reflect critically on our selection criteria. Researchers might ask themselves, Why interview only newlywed couples? Why not elderly couples? What about individuals who are no longer married—might divorcees have

worthwhile stories to tell about the equalities and inequalities they once experienced in their marriages? As a result of such questioning, constructionist scholars may develop an ever-expanding interest in new voices and perspectives. They would not find themselves suddenly able to make strong claims about what equality “really” is. They would, however, be able to say a great deal about what equality means to different persons and groups, as well as where and how those meanings are achieved. In the end, deciding who ought to be heard and which contexts ought to be studied remains a judgment call, one made more complicated because respondents and contexts are constantly changing—even right before our eyes.

As Holstein and Gubrium (1995) have shown, sampling is not a simple matter of letting representatives of populations speak their respective points of view. Even a single person may wear many different hats during the course of an interview, giving different answers to a question depending on whether he or she is, say, “speaking as a mother” or as a daughter, doctor, patient, and so on. People can construct multiple stories about any particular subject as they consider it from different points of view. This is likely to be very frustrating for the researcher who wants to classify a marriage in one of two groups, “equal” or “unequal.” In contrast, a respondent who tells numerous, contradictory, and/or evolving descriptions of equality does not present a problem for constructionist research. Instead, such telling *is* the data.

Collecting a diverse sample may be laudable, but in a constructionist study, even that “diversity” is treated tentatively and reflexively (Holstein and Gubrium 1995). In my research on marital equality (Harris 2001), for instance, I made an effort to gather “demographic” information about the people I interviewed. The brief questionnaire respondents filled out at the end of the interview helped assure me that I was collecting a sample that was diverse along a number of dimensions, such as income, education, and religion. When respondents proved to be overwhelmingly white, attempts could then be made to solicit interviews from more racially diverse individuals. But while I relied on my sociological “common sense” to decide what kinds of summary characteristics were important to consider, I did not interpret respondents’ stories as direct expressions or outcomes of those characteristics. Rather, I treated those attributes as potentially relevant aspects of experience that respondents may or may not incorporate into their stories. Some of my religious respondents, for example, discussed their faith as extremely

important to the state of equality in their marriages. Other respondents did not even mention their faith in the course of my interview with them, even though they later described themselves as belonging to a particular religious tradition on my questionnaire. Moreover, I invited respondents to “talk back” to me about the assumptions built into my questionnaire. In response, some of my respondents told me that their “religion” was too complex to be captured in a simple word or sentence, or that the term “religion” distorted what they saw as their “personal relationship with God.”

The diversity of one’s sample can thus be made richer and more complex as those diverse persons are allowed to challenge the researcher’s attempt to formulate who they are. Constructionism not only discourages us from presumptuously screening “unqualified” respondents, it also encourages us to give our selected respondents more freedom to construct their own identities and storytelling positions. A constructionist approach allows respondents to hold unfolding, inconsistent views and to challenge the researcher’s placement of them into a particular population category.

## CONSTRUCTIONIST INTERVIEWING

A constructionist approach to interviewing looks similar to naturalist interviewing but again requires a different analytical orientation to the process. The naturalist fact-finding mission is replaced by a concern for the *whats* and *hows* of marital equality (see Gubrium and Holstein 1997). There is a greater sensitivity to the diverse meanings equality may have as well as an appreciation for the interpretive procedures through which those meanings are achieved. Thus, a constructionist approach builds on the strength of traditional in-depth interviewing—its attention to actors’ points of view—without forgetting the interactional processes and social settings that contributed to the creation of the data.

To be more sensitive to the diverse *whats* of marital equality, a constructionist interviewer would set aside his or her beliefs about what equality “really” is. There would be no preliminary definitions to structure an interview guide. Instead, the researcher would ask questions aimed at discovering what equality means to people—that is, whether it means having a “50/50” division of labor, or sharing power, or something else entirely. In my research, I made a concerted effort to

encourage respondents to describe the nature of the equality or inequality in their marriages as they saw it. I was purposefully vague, especially at the beginning of interviews, about what I thought “marital equality” might be taken to mean. Consider the following excerpt from my interview with a stay-home mom, Sally, who told me on the phone that she thought she had an equal marriage. Some researchers, of course, would disagree with Sally and would immediately disqualify her from their samples because she was not employed or looking for work (Deutsch 1999; Haas 1980). From a constructionist perspective, however, it is interesting to see how she constructs a sense of equality that is meaningful to her, irrespective of scholarly criteria.

Scott: I'd just like to hear from you in your own words about your own marriage and um, what it's like, and in what way it's equal, how it works for you . . .

Sally: Well . . . we've been married um, for four years, in July, July 10th, and I'm a good bit older than my husband. He's 23 and I'm 32. And in the beginning of the marriage, um, . . . I worked like a dog to put him through college, and he stayed at-, went to school and then stayed at home and did whatever and then . . . I was always the primary breadwinner until I got pregnant quite unexpectedly. We were married two years when I got pregnant, and um, everything totally shifted, where he went to work and I stayed home. And um, so in that aspect it's been very equal. Each of us has gotten to take a turn doing what we wanted to do. You know, he wanted to go to school, so I worked; now I wanted to stay home be pregnant and have the baby, now he works. Even though it's a lot less money when he works, because he's younger, and so forth and so on. But it's OK, we never really cared about money anyway.

Given the interactional framework I provided with my question, Sally reflected on her marital biography and cut out two “objects” (Blumer 1969) from her biography, two situations: (1) she once worked so that her husband could stay home and attend school; (2) now he works so she can stay home with the baby. Sally characterized the two situations as outcomes of what one or the other person wanted; moreover, she treated them as equivalent “turns” in a sequence. While scholarly concerns about the division of labor can be seen in Sally's response, that issue was only a subtheme in the larger tale about her and her husband each taking turns doing what they wanted to do. This was her emerging depiction of the equality in her marriage. It was a locally

adequate rendition, at least for current practical purposes. Sally could certainly have revised her story, perhaps even reinterpreting the turn-taking as unfair or irrelevant in light of new considerations. In a constructionist approach, she would be given free reign to do so.

My opening question reflected my desire to encourage respondents to talk about equality in their marriages in ways that reflected their own perspectives and concerns. By asking vaguely about “how equality works” for them, I left it up to Sally and my other respondents to fill in “equality” with whatever content *they* deemed relevant. In short, I tried to discover the *whats* that concerned them. At the same time, though, I recognized that their “perspectives and concerns” emerged within the unfolding interview context and that a different interaction would have likely evoked a different kind of story. I tried to remain aware, as I conducted the interviews and read my transcripts, of how I influenced the course of my interviews. One way to cultivate this awareness is to imagine the different actions I could have taken but didn’t. At the end of the excerpt above, for example, I could have asked any number of follow-up questions or made any number of comments. Whatever I said might have made Sally more or less confident about her story, perhaps encouraging or discouraging her from continuing along the same lines. Consider these potential statements I could have made, had I been inclined to do so:

- “That’s terrific.”
- “Tell me more about taking turns—do you do a lot of that in your marriage?”
- “You said you ‘worked like a dog’ when you were employed. Do you think your husband works as hard now that it’s his turn to have a job outside the home?”
- “So first you put your husband through school, and then you gave up your own career in order to raise his child. Some people might think that’s a very *unequal* arrangement. What would you say to them?”

Instead of making any of these comments, I chose to say nothing during the brief pause in her talk. My silence at this juncture, however, was far from “un-provocative.” It was arguably just as consequential for the emerging story as any of the above statements might have been. My lack of verbal input prompted Sally to switch to another topic rather than elaborating on what she had already said. As I smiled and nodded at her attentively, Sally proceeded in a new direction.

Sally: Um, he listens to me.

Scott: Does he?

Sally: Yeah. I used to think it was because I was older, but now I think it's just because he . . . values my opinion, he understands that because I'm older I may actually know more than he does, you know, it's not, he's not givin' in to his wife or being . . . whipped or whatever. Because I have, you know, the benefit of almost 10 years more experience than he does. So he actually listens to me, and I listen to him because, you know, lot of things I try don't turn out too good. So if he's got a idea about something, then we'll go with that. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. We don't really get mad at each other if it doesn't, that's kind of the nature of life.

Scott: OK. So you think that's probably an aspect of the equality, how you kinda, you both listen to each other's opinions and-

Sally: Yeah. See, if, if he tells, if he sounds right, I'll, you know, we'll go with him. It depends on who has the most conviction, you know, kinda. If I really feel really strongly about something, and he's just kinda half-assed, you know, well, we'll go with what I want to do. If he has a really strong conviction about something then we'll go with what he thinks. We're not real big arguers, you know.

Unlike the first excerpt, this time I verbally encouraged Sally to say more about one of her comments ("he listens to me"). I also brought her back to the topic of the interview by directly asking her if listening was an aspect of the equality in her marriage. In response, she discussed "conviction" as a recurrent factor in the way she and her husband made decisions. Thus, here my participation in the creation of Sally's story is even more obvious. Sally looked to me for cues about what constituted a full and satisfactory answer, and elaborated on the parts of her married life that appeared to interest me. She carefully framed her remarks so that they fit the theme of the interview, ultimately telling a habitual narrative (Riessman 1990) about recurrent communication and decision-making practices. In this way, Sally assembled her marital biography into an egalitarian pattern that was meaningful to her, but the image that emerged was still a collaborative portrait.

A sensitivity to the *whats* and *hows* of marital equality stands in stark contrast with traditional approaches. Qualitative naturalists hope to "mine the minds" (Holstein and Gubrium 1995) of married people, gathering as much relevant information as possible while remaining alert for myths and mis-interpretations. In contrast, a constructionist approach recognizes that the meaning of that "relevant information" is

always an interpretive and somewhat improvisational accomplishment.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, it does not relegate that insight to a methodological footnote, but considers meaning-production to be part and parcel of the analysis. That is, both the meanings *and* the processes that create them are “the data.”

### CONSTRUCTIONIST DATA ANALYSIS

The tendency in naturalistic research is to construct composite pictures. Scholars paint a comprehensive portrait of equality, complete with a formal definition and organized lists of associated benefits, impediments, and the like. Coherent marital profiles are assembled from the raw material of interview responses, questionnaire data, and/or field observations. These interpretive biographies-at-hand (Gubrium and Holstein 1997) are presented as objective, authoritative descriptions of married lives. In contrast, the constructionist alternative to this is to try to understand and convey the coherence that already exists in *respondents' stories*. Taken separately, those diverse stories may appear to the naturalist as incomplete, illogical, or otherwise lacking. The constructionist maxim, however, is to try to “keep the diversity intact”—to respect and study each respondent’s narrative as a meaningful and creative accomplishment. Individual responses must be studied within their larger spoken context, not quickly fragmented and re-formed within researcher-generated categories.

Just as professional ethnographers juxtapose examples and ideas to prove a point, so too do respondents. In the course of an interview, respondents themselves pare down the available biographical data, interpretively analyze and present it. They may even place their stories about equality within a historical context, linking the import of their tale to their own family background, to the feminist movement, or to an ancient religious tradition (see Harris 2001). Thus, the sorts of interview snippets that traditional approaches rely upon can be re-placed in their larger conversational context and analyzed as components of a meaningful story built up by the respondent in concert with the interviewer. Researchers’ questions might be included in the presentation whenever possible, so their influence could be apparent to readers. Respondents’ hesitations, false starts, revisions, and expressions of doubt might also be included, so the evolving, improvisational aspects of their views could be detected. The end result is a tentative, revisable



understanding of diverse equality meanings and the processes that produce them. A more humble “interpretive study of interpretations” is pursued as an alternative to a confident “sociology of error” approach.

A major analytical feature that both constructionism and naturalism do share is an emphasis on *contingency*. Both approaches claim that neither equality nor inequality is inevitable. The sense of contingency that is in play, however, is not identical. For naturalists, many social factors (such as dysfunctional cultural lags) affect the potential realization of equality (Kimball 1983; Hochschild 1989), as do the daily behaviors of married couples. Deutsch (1999) stridently accentuates the contingency of human agency, repeatedly asserting that spouses must *create* equality even within societal constraints.

Couples create equality by the accumulation of large and small decisions and acts that make up their everyday lives as parents. Couples become equal or unequal in working out the details: who makes children’s breakfasts, washes out their diaper pails, kisses their boo-boos, takes off from work when they are sick, and teaches them to ride bikes. (Deutsch 1999, 230; see also 1, 12, 58-9, 134, 152-3, etc.)

The problem with this statement, at least from a constructionist perspective, is that it assumes too much. Why assume that equality means co-parenting and that the signs of equality (e.g., teaching one’s children to ride bikes) are obvious? It appears that naturalist arguments about the contingency of equality can only be made by holding the meaning of equality constant.<sup>8</sup>

Constructionist analysis starts from a different and, arguably, deeper understanding of contingency: the idea that equality and inequality are *interpretive* accomplishments. The constructionist alternative is not to assume but to investigate what particular signs matter to different married persons, as well as how they combine those signs into intelligible patterns. *Work* is also the subject of constructionist inquiry, but it is a different kind of work: the work of actively constituting a sense of reality. Constructionism’s superficial similarity to naturalism continues in that it does not view “work” as taking place within a world devoid of social patterns or constraint. People generally have much interpretive leeway, but not just any interpretation will do. Stories about marital equality must “make sense” and fit within an ongoing stream of interaction. Settings tend to condition, but not determine, the possible tales that can be told (Gubrium and Holstein 1995). Research interviews,



courtrooms, group counseling sessions, and other discursive environments (Gubrium and Holstein 2000) tend to favor some plot lines over others and exert an influence on the way narratives are composed (Loseke 2001). Thus, both naturalists and constructionists study contingency and constraint, but not in the same way: the constructionist studies equality-meanings and the contingent factors affecting their creation; the naturalist studies the reality of "equality" and the contingent factors affecting its creation.

Constructionism is also deceptively similar to naturalism in that constructionist data analysis can also be linked in different ways to larger sets of concerns. In principle, there are an infinite number of constructionist tales that might be told. Current academic practices, however, encourage some plot lines over others. One basic story constructionists might articulate would position their research within in one or more segments of "the field." That is, a constructionist scholar can situate his or her research on marital equality within one or more ongoing academic "conversations." A point I have tried to make in my research, speaking to interactionists and mainstream family scholars, is simply, "Traditional research practices are missing something." In this article and elsewhere (e.g., Harris 2001), I have made an effort to compare the meanings respondents give to marital equality with the meanings scholars have attributed to it. I draw on my interviews to raise troubling issues and contradict scholars' taken-for-granted definitions. I ask, What is to be done about my respondent who claims to follow a Biblical model of equality, wherein the relevant categories are "submitting," "relinquishing," and "elevating"? What about my respondent who complains not about housework but about her spouse's intellectual inferiority? What about my respondent who casts biographical instances such as drug use, clothing, and demeanor as indicators of a major "lifestyle inequality" in her marriage? A naturalist might ignore those interpretations, dismissing them as mythical or inaccurate; I choose to analyze and present them as skillful narrative accomplishments that challenge and complicate the usual way of studying marital equality.

A second and slightly more ambitious point constructionist research might make is that "Interpretive differences matter, and should be taken seriously." This point builds on the first one by claiming that capturing what has been missed is itself a worthwhile endeavor. Why is it worthwhile? Here the rationale may be that divergent interpretations do actually play a crucial role in human affairs, and it is our "job," after all, to

study those affairs (Blumer 1969). Respecting and studying the viewpoints of others makes for better sociology because it gives us a clearer sense of—or at least another way of thinking about—what’s going on out there. Perhaps various persons could benefit from this enhanced knowledge: social movement activists who want to bridge their equality frames with those of their audiences (see Snow et al. 1986), therapists who want to help troubled couples construct more workable stories to live by (see Miller 2001; Freedman and Combs 1996; Parry and Doan 1994), and married couples who want to critically reflect on the criteria they use to decide whether their marriages are “equal enough” for them. Anybody who wants to bring about a better or more “equal” social world could benefit from a constructionist understanding of the interpretive nature of claims about marital equality: how claims are made, contested, changed, and so on. To avail themselves of constructionist insights, however, people would have to be willing to accept that equality and inequality are interpretations, not objective self-evident facts. They would have to appreciate the reflexivity of moral talk as an unavoidable feature of social problem resolution (see Harris 2000b; Blumer 1971; Dewey 1989; Loseke 1999; Miller and Holstein 1989).

A third story-line within which constructionist research might be couched is the historical context of marital equality. This context, however, would not be the naturalist’s context. It would not decry a stalled revolution that is impeding equality (Hochschild 1989), or praise marital equality as a brand new form of marriage (Kimball 1983; Schwartz 1994). For a constructionist, the historical context would have more to do with past occurrences of marital equality discourse. The presumption would be that current claims about marital equality are built upon or arise out of previous claims about equality, both in marriage and beyond marriage (see Loseke 1999; Condit and Lucaites 1993; Spencer 2000). The big story of marital equality, from a constructionist perspective, is the history of the term “marital equality” as it has been used over time by different individuals and groups. To my knowledge, such a history has yet to be written in any detail (but see Trumbach 1978).

## CONCLUSION

My goal in this article has been to develop further an interactionist, social constructionist approach to the study of equality and inequality.

Focusing on the subfield of marital equality, I have tried to illustrate some of the major differences between naturalist and constructionist qualitative research on equality. My argument throughout has been that a constructionist approach is more sensitive to meaning and its creation (Gubrium and Holstein 1997). Naturalism tends to ignore and obscure the diverse meanings marital equality may have for people, as well as the interpretive processes through which (and contexts within which) those meanings are assembled. One way constructionism can remedy this neglect is to focus on storytelling—that is, on everyday narratives and the scholarly tales in which they become embedded (Maines 1993). As a result, we might better understand how equality and inequality emerge as consequential objects (Blumer 1969) in different social worlds.

On one hand, there is a sense in which this article has gone too far. I have reviewed the qualitative literature with an eye toward making a discernable contrast. Consequently, it is possible I have overdrawn the distinction between naturalist and constructionist approaches. Perhaps a future review might purposefully search for commonalities and produce an article complementary to this one. For example, Hochschild's (1989) concept of the "economy of gratitude" is somewhat constructionist in that it portrays spouses' perceptions of fairness as being a highly interpretive matter: A husband's workload at home may seem "large" in comparison to what his friends do or what his own father once did, but "small" in comparison to what his wife currently does. Divergent depictions of fairness may result, depending on which frame of reference a spouse employs. Ideas such as these might be incorporated into a constructionist account, once they were separated from their naturalist assumptions—in this case, that a fair division of labor is the correct definition or most germane aspect of marital equality, that household activities can be clearly categorized into "tasks" and "non-tasks," and that an equal relationship involves a 45/55 split in three categories of household labor (Hochschild 1989). Future research could thus attempt to extract and refine the "embryonic" constructionist insights that already exist within naturalistic work on marital equality.

On the other hand, there is a sense in which my review did not go far enough. Why focus solely on the field of marital equality? Don't most social scientists take the meaning of equality and inequality for granted? In other subfields, even the most interpretive scholars appear to repeat the sorts of naturalist tendencies I have discussed here:

assuming an explicit or implicit definition, confidently discounting interpretations by employing a myth/reality distinction, and constructing causal accounts instead of studying how storytellers employ their own narratives (Holden 1997; Horowitz 1997; Schwalbe 2000). Consider a brief sampling of recent statements on inequality:

I define 'classes' as. . . . Based on this definition, two distinctive patterns of class stratification may be identified on the Chinese mainland since 1957. (Chang 2000, 237)

Social psychology holds great promise for illuminating social inequality. . . . It seems uniquely positioned to disentangle the ways that inequality is produced and maintained. (Hollander and Howard 2000, 349)

We take inequality to be endemic to and pervasive in capitalist societies. . . . We ask, How is this inequality reproduced?—and then seek answers in terms of generic processes out of which inequality emerges or is sustained. (Schwalbe et al. 2000, 421)

Thus, even among interpretive scholars the assumption is that inequality is something *they* are “uniquely positioned” to identify, that more of *their* causal accounts is what’s needed. I disagree. Aren’t enough sociologists telling that kind of story? I believe that the entire field of sociology (and related disciplines) might benefit if, at least for a while, more qualitative researchers took a radical stance and converted inequality from a research resource to a research topic (see Zimmerman and Pollner 1970). Some provocative questions might arise: What could be gained if we considered the equal/unequal dichotomy to be a tool that people use to create a sense of social order? What may be missed if we don’t?

## NOTES

1. Gubrium and Holstein (1997) recommend that qualitative scholars remain aware of the tension between naturalism and constructionism, in order to make conscious choices about which facets of experience will be bracketed and which will remain taken for granted (for current practical purposes) as observably real. They argue that in this way the irremediable tension between the two perspectives can be utilized as a source of inspiration.

2. Naturally, Kimball’s and Schwartz’s treatments of marital equality are not identical. For example, while Kimball (1983, 29-30) explicitly mentions wives keeping their

own last names as a potentially significant issue, Schwartz does not. Or, compare Schwartz's (1994, 69-110) lengthy treatment of sexual relations to Kimball's (1983, 80-1, 154) brief remarks. The authors give very different impressions about the relative importance of sexuality to equality in marriage.

Inconsistency also can be found when one looks to other sorts of authors. Consider two marital therapists' definition of the perfect egalitarian relationship: "To achieve this would be: (1) never letting . . . 'irrational shoulds' get in the way, (2) never trying to win even when each has a big stake in the situation, and (3) never using negative emotion or anger to solve problems" (Tuites and Tuites 1986, 194). Also, see Lynch (1992, 13-15), a therapist with a contrasting perspective on power and the division of labor.

3. In the interview data I present here, I use ellipses (" . . . ") to indicate pauses and ellipses in brackets ("[ . . . ]") to indicate that I have deleted portions of the talk.

4. For contrasting perspectives on the "tasks" of housework, see Valadez and Clignet (1984), Shaw (1988), Coleman (1988), and Ahlander and Bahr (1995). It is also interesting to note that one of my respondents, "Deborah," relayed an anecdote somewhat similar to Barbara's. Deborah also spoke of a situation involving opened doors and invaded privacy (Harris 2001, 470), but Deborah cast the incident as part of a larger pattern of power inequality, not "communicating about irritations."

5. Kimball (1983) is an exception in that she includes an appendix containing full transcriptions of three of her interviews. I am grateful to her for that, because otherwise I would not have been able to see or convey some of the differences between naturalist and constructionist interviewing.

6. Even "lies" create a sense of social order and must be told in an intelligible way.

7. To what degree Sally's story is malleable and transient is an empirical matter, one that would have to be studied by comparing the tales she told in different circumstances about "the same" marital relationship. It seems likely that Sally would not make up a *completely* new account for each new occasion. The idea of "taking turns," for example, could be very important to her; it could be a narrative resource that she frequently incorporates into the stories she tells about her personal life. But a constructionist perspective suggests that the "taking turns" theme will be worked out in diverse ways from one storytelling occasion to another, as new examples are activated and new linkages are created in response to new situations.

However, it is important to note that even if *all* of Sally's themes and examples were constantly changing and completely context-specific, a constructionist approach would still dignify them as worthy of study. Constructionists seek to study the meanings of everyday life (Harris 2000b), and if those meanings are fleeting, then so be it. Moreover, from a constructionist perspective, it is wrong to think of research interviews as separate from the real world; an interview is a social interaction within the social world and, as such, merits inquiry (see Baker 2002; Holstein and Gubrium 1995). Even if the particular tales a person tells don't recur, the interpretive processes that created them probably will. The dynamics of storytelling might remain the same, regardless of whether the stories people live by are undergoing constant revision.

8. See also Spector and Kitsuse's (1977) constructionist critique of functionalist approaches to the identification and analysis of social problems. Occasionally, some naturalists' stories (Kimball 1983, 177; Hochschild 1989, 12) are reminiscent of the functionalist idea that uneven social change can lead to disequilibrium (Ogburn 1957).

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