

# How Social Constructionism Could Inform the Education of Social Work Practitioners: An Interview with Dennis Saleebey

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**Abstract:** This narrative came about through attending the Global Partnership of Transformative Social Work Conference with Dennis Saleebey in 2006. We happened to be in the same discussion group and I was so inspired by his thoughts that I decided to study how social constructionism could be used to educate social work practitioners. As part of the study he graciously agreed to a one hour interview.

**Keywords:** social construction; social constructionism; social work practice; strengths

It has been over a year since the field of social work lost Dennis Saleebey. Dennis' work is well known, and along with Bertha Reynolds who came years before him, he was one of the foremost proponents and scholars of strengths-based practice in social work. I had the pleasure of meeting Dennis several times throughout his career and have been in conversation with him enough to appreciate his brilliant mind and his wonderful sense of humor. Dennis radiated positivity. He brought a smile to all who passed his way and he became incredibly influential in my career.

Dennis represented the best of social work to me. He represented strength, hope, practicality, a real sensibility, and an ever present positive possibility for change. In a place of academic wandering, I found his writing to be a light through the fog and it was in a recent state of wandering that I came across an interview I conducted with him several years ago on social constructionism, practice, and teaching.

In 2006, I was working on a qualitative research project exploring how social constructionism could inform the education of social work practitioners. As part of this project I reached out to Dennis to see if he would grant me an hour interview on the subject. I had known Dennis from our mutual connection with the Global Partnership of Transformative Social Work and its annual conference held in Vermont. We had spent time together in discussion groups and because of this connection I believe he felt comfortable enough with me to say yes to an hour-long interview. I was absolutely elated at the prospect and spent hours preparing for the conversation.

The project was to explore the application of social constructionist theory in education, so I wanted to use an interview approach that was congruent with the topic. To that end, I decided to utilize reflexive, dyadic interviewing (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010), a social constructionist-informed interviewing method in which one grand tour

question was asked and the conversation flowed organically from it. The grand tour question was specific to how social constructionist theory could be used to teach social work practitioners and, if schools of social work were to adopt the approach, how the field could change. While the open nature of the question was designed to create space for the natural construction of conversation, being a very passionate postmodern social work scholar who was thrilled to be able to speak with one of my professional idols, I was a bit nervous with no other question to fall back on. I was interviewing Dennis with no net, but it turned out to be both informative and wonderfully fun. The following is the transcript from our conversation:

## The *Very Large Question*

**Chris:** Thank you very much for agreeing to do the interview. I really appreciate it. To start off I have a large, overall question, and it's an unstructured interview, so where it goes from there is up to us. At any time, if you're uncomfortable, we can stop the interview, or if a question comes up that you're uncomfortable with answering, feel free to do that. Does all that sound good?

**Dennis:** Sure.

**Chris:** My first large-scale question is: What value, if any, do you see in social constructionist ideas informing the education of social work practitioners?

**Dennis:** (Short pause) That *is* a large question.

**Chris:** It's a *very large* question.

**Dennis:** Well, I am not exactly sure where to start, but I think what I would say is that social constructionism asks us to regard the fact that there may not be, that there probably is not a single truth, but there are many truths, and truths are interpretive frameworks or assumptions that people use to try and figure the world out. The world of their interests and their activity. And I think for social work, that's what we try to do. We

see people from all kinds of social circumstances, cultures, ethnic groups, and part of our job is to do what we can to get into their world and how they can construct and how they construe their daily lives, their futures, their pasts, their relationships, their troubles. So I think social constructionism gives us a set of appreciations and some tools to actually do that more effectively than we might otherwise do.

**Chris:** Right, so a set of appreciations, and tools, and it sounds like, there is a respect of perspectives?

**Dennis:** Yes, I mean, a real social constructionist view suggests that I don't have any privilege because of my own particular or framework or interpretation. But what I *am* concerned about is how my interpretation, my constructions of the world, reflect a set of values which are important to me. And I think that would be the rule for social work, you know. To what extent do the constructions that we have – for example, like multiculturalism – to what extent does that reflect a set of values that are important to the profession?

### Teaching Social Constructionism

**Chris:** How, in your mind, do you think that this idea of social constructionism, and a reflection of values, and to instill in a student the importance of reflecting on their own values and respecting opinions; how do you think that could be taught in a classroom?

**Dennis:** Well, I think there are a lot of ways to do it. Maybe some are better than others. I don't know what "better" means, but maybe some make it more *comfortable* for students to do it and maybe more comfortable for teachers to do. But, I think one of the core things that you do is to ask people to reflect on how they interpret certain elements of the world, whether it's relationships, or parent-child relationships, or understandings of people who are different from they are, or spiritual understandings. If you get people to share their interpretations of parts of the world that are important to them, and you'll notice right off, as you well know, that they are different. They're not totally different, there are similarities and themes that run across what different people would say, but there are differences.

**Chris:** Do you, or have you used any of those ideas in your teaching? And are there any specific exercises that you might use or suggest?

**Dennis:** Well, I'm not an exercise guy. That sounds

like a stupid thing to say, but – what I do is if things come up in the moment, then you create something out of that. And sometimes students create things...that look like exercises, feel like exercises. But I don't have a set of things that I do, except to ask students to reflect on their own background and their own orientations and interpretations of various things.

**Chris:** If you could give some advice to social constructionist oriented teachers, on how to keep an open eye, or an open ear, to those moments, could you give some advice?

**Dennis:** Oh, well, I hate to give advice, because they tell us not to do that, but we do it all the time, so I would say that one thing you have to do is surrender the role of expert. You have to suspend your own disbelief...*and* belief, and you have to create an environment where people understand that *you* understand that there may be many truths about a situation.

**Chris:** Okay. Now, as a follow-up question, I'm just wondering *how* you can do that in a classroom where one of the teacher requirements is to grade and to pass.

**Dennis:** Well, that makes it all so damn difficult.

**Chris:** (Laughing) It does. It throws a wrench in it.

**Dennis:** It really does, but I think one of the things you can do is to talk about that. To talk about their understanding and experience of grading, and for you to talk about it honestly, as well, and to talk about grading as an interpretive, evaluative moment, as a social constructionist would. That's what it is. I mean, I read your paper, and if I read it when I have gas or something (both Chris & Dennis laugh), I may have a different interpretation of it than if I read it if I'm, you know, I'm feeling pretty good. I mean, so that we all understand it's an interpretive thing. And the other thing that I do in class is, I try to make grading a collaborative – as much as I can, I mean you can't completely do it – collaborative process. And also to give students chances to rethink and reflect on what they've done, and maybe take another stab at it.

**Chris:** Yes, so with this collaborative process of grading, it sounds like you allow them to reflect and maybe redo. What else does it look like; do they put a grade on it as well?

**Dennis:** Well, yeah, they certainly can. They can tell me what they think that their grade is, or what they've striven for in the work that they do and I'll respect that

but we have to engage in a conversation about it if it's different, if mine is different from theirs. And I think the hard thing is to tease out, I don't know if it's hard but it can get knotty – not 'naughty' but 'knotty' –

**Chris:** (laughing) Sure, yeah, I am with you.

**Dennis:** ...to tease out what their expertise is as opposed to mine. Because they know stuff I don't know. And they've had experiences that I haven't had. And so that's important too. I don't want to abandon my own expertise or my own knowledge. But I have to understand more clearly what theirs is. And sometimes that requires a sort of a rethinking – this is the collaborative part – about how they've answered. Or, not how they've answered but how they've written an essay or something. But I still have to grade, but I try to give them every chance to do as well as they possibly can. One of the things I do is if we finally end up with a grade, and they don't like it, they don't think that it represents what they did, then they write me a little essay about why they think that's so, and it's a request for me to rethink it. And often that involves a conversation with them.

**Chris:** That, sounds like a very nice way of doing that. And I'm assuming that the way you present it avoids conflict? Or is conflict something that shouldn't be avoided?

**Dennis:** Well, conflict is okay, really, as long as it's respectful, but sometimes students come – I mean they've had, what, fifteen, eighteen years of this kind of education so grades are, *the* thing, and the teacher's the expert, and the judge, and so sometimes it's hard to get around that. But I try to give them the chance to explain themselves in terms of *why* they think they deserve another grade. The problem with the whole thing is, you're sort of making grades more important when you do that, so we talk about that, too.

**Chris:** So it becomes kind of the end state when you don't want it to be the end state, it becomes the goal? (Laughs)

**Dennis:** (Laughs) Yeah, well, what we're all talking about now is grades, and I'm thinking of... 'A.' You know? And that's not really very productive, I think.

### Social Constructionism and the DSM

**Chris:** Right, so with these social constructionist

views that different perspectives are respected and that one view is not privileged, as well as the negotiation of grades, and the negotiation of different perspectives; what is it that you hope that your students come away with from your classes? What might they go into the field with that may assist them or assist their clients?

**Dennis:** Well, what I hope is I really want them to be able to be attuned to other people's perspectives and interpretations of events, relationships, ideas, futures, whatever it might be. I want them to be able to be open to hear those. And to not put a grid on it. And that's one of the things I hate about – one of the *many* things I hate about the DSM – is that it gives you a grid and it *obliterates* other people's views of their suffering, of the uncertainty, of their confusion, – maybe that's just the way they live their life. So you can't hear it. You don't invite it because you have a manual of truth. And the DSM is just the most obvious example of that, but we do it, we do it all the time, I guess, in one-way or another.

**Chris:** And would you hope that your students would find ways to change the field, or to reduce the importance of the DSM in social work?

**Dennis:** Well, we talk about that. I teach a course in mental health and psychopathology, and we start the course talking about the *words* mental health and psychopathology, what does that all mean. But one of the things we talk about it is how could you change it – you *have* to use the DSM, I mean there's no not using it...it's everywhere. It's now in schools, and it's in extended care facilities, it's ubiquitous. So the question is, how can you use it? And so students come up with a lot of really interesting ideas about how to do it, but to do it from a standpoint of respecting different viewpoints. And some of the ideas are encouraging the person they're working with to come up with their own assessment. That's the working assessment, but you don't put it down on paper because the insurance companies won't tolerate it.

**Chris:** Sure, there's no number that's attached to that, right.

**Dennis:** Yeah, right! Well, sometimes, some students do a strengths assessment, a DSM of strengths. And the basic idea is to *expand* the range of interpretations one can take of people's experience. And with the recognition that your institution or organization's going to make you do certain things. In which case, some students do it collaboratively. "We have to have this diagnosis. Now, here's the range of diagnoses that

are available, this is what they mean, which ones do you want to talk about, which ones do you think would be most helpful to you?"

**Chris:** Do you find that students, when they first come to your class, and hear these collaborative ideas and the interpretation of the DSM, are they open to seeing the DSM as something other than this truth-giver, this tomb of truth?

**Dennis:** Uh, no, not really.

**Chris:** How do you? – or do you? – slowly open them up to be able to see the DSM as something other than this giver of truth?

**Dennis:** Well, I think the basic thing is to encourage in them a dose of healthy skepticism...I mean after introductions, after the course gets going...there are several things to do. One is to look at other points of view about diagnosis and the DSM. And there *are* other points of view. And one of the best is, Kirk and Kutchins (1992). So students can see the historical, political, social elements of the creation of diagnoses. And that's helpful. Another thing that seems to be helpful is to have them share, if they want to, either in terms of a client they've worked with or their own personal life – share what it was like to have a diagnosis that didn't jive with your own experience of yourself. And that someone imposed upon you. And sometimes students have some really wonderful examples about that. And, uh...(Pause) oh, God, there was a third one, it just slipped my mind... Uh, oh, shoot. (Pause) Oh, I know what it – yeah. It's to – this is the best, the most important one, that's why I forgot it. (Both laugh) You know. Is to have people come in who have been given diagnoses...and talk about it. And talk about the discrepancy between their experience and the diagnosis, the process of being diagnosed, their view of themselves...and how being diagnosed may have brought the change in their life – and sometimes the change is good, because they get some sort of treatment that they could really benefit from. And that's helpful.

**Chris:** Wow, that's fantastic. And the students, I'm assuming, are pretty receptive to that?

**Dennis:** Oh, yeah. God, they love that stuff. I mean, they really do, they really do want to hear from people who've gone through it. Rather than me.

**Chris:** (Laughs) Right.

**Dennis:** But I admit, I don't tell them my diagnosis

anyway. They can guess.

**Chris:** (Laughing) Maybe that could be an assignment!

**Dennis:** (Laughing Simultaneously) Actually, I do! I ask them! I ask them, "Give me a diagnosis." And they say, "No! What are you talking about?" "No," I say, "seriously. Just on the basis of what we've been talking about – give me a diagnosis" and, Jesus, I can't believe it, I'd just be hospitalized. (Both laughing)

### Social Constructionism and the Social Work Field

**Chris:** So if, let's say, by some stroke of magical fate, that schools across the country, the social work school's master's programs, began to use some of these methods that you've talked about. And began to teach psychopathology in these ways, and deconstruct the DSM, and all of the sudden these graduates started to go out into the field. Ideally, what would you hope for the field? How would you hope that it would change?

**Dennis:** Well, my hope would be that people would not mistake the diagnosis for the reality, for one thing. That people would begin to see every other individual or family or whatever, even community, in much broader terms than are provided by something as narrow as the DSM. That they really would take a bio-psycho-social-spiritual view of people as individuals or collectivities. Social workers are going to have to use the DSM, but what they add to it is the filigree of greater understanding, and possibility of other, more – what would I say? – more humane or more relevant interventions for people.

**Chris:** And what would those interventions look like? Would they change? Which interventions might be more prominent than others?

**Dennis:** Well, for example, the DSM actually doesn't say anything about intervention. So you have to do this on a case-by-case basis. But let's say we have someone who is diagnosed with, and seems to have some of the classic symptoms that people have talked about for years, of schizophrenia. Number one, how do we understand it? And number two, what are the things that are going to be helpful for that person, in terms of them achieving the goal of living the kind of life they'd like to live, maybe normalizing their life a little bit. What are some of the things that we would have to do *with* them in order to make that happen? And, immediately, you want to get beyond medication – I mean, medication is going to be important for a lot

of people – but you want to get beyond medication, to what other kinds of things would be important? And one of the ways to help students think about that is to have, either in person or written, what people have said who've struggled with these illnesses. This is what I wish would've happened, this is what I needed, this is what I wanted, this is what really was helpful to me. So they get a broader sense of the kind of things you can do to be really helpful.

**Chris:** Would you hope in this kind of ideal world that the DSM ceased being pivotal, like the hub of the wheel, if you will?

**Dennis:** Oh, yeah, I do. But, I know, it's hard to see that happening. I mean, because, the fact is, unfortunately, we're under the influence of a cartel. And it's a medical, psychiatric, insurance and pharmaceutical cartel, and it's terrible. And one of the things that has been somewhat helpful for students is to realize the narrowness of that. Just for example – and this is a great example – two years ago, three psychiatrists and one or two public health people used the Freedom of Information Act to get into the FDA's records. The FDA has all the clinical trials of the drug companies. In this case it was anti-depressant drugs. But they never make them public. So people don't really know what these clinical trials suggest about the effectiveness of drugs. So they took all the clinical trials that were done for the six major anti-depressants, from, I think, fifteen years. Fifteen years' worth of clinical trials. They did meta-analyses, they did a very conservative one and a very liberal one; you know, they wanted to make sure the results couldn't be challenged by other people as being biased. And what they found was there's no clinical significant difference between placebos and anti-depressant drugs. And more and more people are saying, *clinicians* are saying, "Boy, there probably are people who need anti-depressants, maybe people with really serious depression, to kind of break the log jam. But my God, there's so many things we can do that don't involve drugs and all the problems that drugs have." And one of the major problems that anti-depressant drugs have is the after-effects once you go off the drug. In a couple of cases, with Zoloft and I think Paxil was the other one, people have struggled for months with all kinds of weird symptoms.

### Research and Social Constructionism

**Chris:** So, if social workers then went out into the field, began to respect client opinions and client

perspectives a little more, and engaged with them collaboratively in these interventions using social constructionist thought, would outcome studies be important in that process? And if they were important, what would they look like?

**Dennis:** Well, I have a lot of prejudices about outcome studies. It's not about outcome studies, *per se*, but it's about how they're done. I think – and I'm not the person to do it, 'cause I have no research expertise – but I think if you could do participant outcome studies, *collaborative* outcome studies, that would be a terrific thing. I mean, in community-building we do that all the time. You don't just do a study of how well the program was going or the community-building process was going. You involve the residents in doing that kind of stuff. Building the research and then conducting it and interpreting it.

**Chris:** Could you imagine what that could look like with a client?

**Dennis:** I think it would be great. I think you ought to do it, I mean, you should do everything with clients. Of course, this is easy for me to say – just sitting here. But, I think clients, for example, should have a say in what goes written in a record. And not only read it, but maybe amend it, and say, "Well, no, that's not what I meant. This is what I meant. And this is how I'd like to say that." Because everyone's got to have an official file somewhere.

**Chris:** Sure, and clients could have the opportunity to review it, maybe collaboratively write it.

**Dennis:** Yeah, to review it and then to edit it and say, "This does not represent what we've talked about."

**Chris:** I'm with you – I can go ahead and share with you, because of the nature of this interview – that I also have problems with outcome research. Could you speak a little bit to those problems that you may have with it?

**Dennis:** Well, again, I'm out of my area. But the first problem I'd have with it would be that it's pre-set. It comes not out of the experience of the participant, but it comes out of the values and predilections of the researcher. And oftentimes the outcome study can really be crafted without any input from the people who're going to be a part of it.

**Chris:** So, it seeks to prove what it already has determined?

**Dennis:** Well, and it can change the process. I mean, if you know the outcome is supposed to be – a ‘good’ outcome – that can affect how, the kind of things you do and then the kind of things you don’t do. The question is how can you do this in a participatory way that makes sense and has some degree of power?

### Early Influences, Recommendations, and Words of Wisdom

**Chris:** Just thinking about books, about texts, about certain authors that you might recommend students to read to be able to get some of these ideas across. What might you recommend?

**Dennis:** Oh, well, in terms of DSM stuff, I would recommend they read Kirk and Kutchins (1992). And probably their latest one, which is, I think, called *Making Us Crazy* (Kutchins & Kirk, 2003). Then I think I would have them read some strengths literature, resilience literature, and recovery literature. Not twelve-step recovery. People who have recovered or are recovering from serious mental illness.

**Chris:** Oh, that’s interesting. Autobiography?

**Dennis:** Some autobiographical, it’s, there’s some qualitative stuff. But it’s mostly narrative. People who’ve written *well* and *fairly* about mental illness and its treatment. And I think one of the people who *used* to, I think someone said he’s kind of gone off of track lately, is E. Fuller Torrey. I think he had, like, three or four editions of *Surviving Schizophrenia* (2013). Which is a really helpful book for people wanting to understand. He’s not saying it doesn’t exist, it does exist, his sister has it, he’s worked with people with schizophrenia, but he has a much broader view of thinking about it. And I think I’d want students to read some basic social construction stuff. And the two things that I’d recommend that they’d read – doesn’t have anything to do with mental illness much – are *Acts of Meaning* by Jerome Bruner (1990) and *Invitation to Social Construction* by Kenneth Gergen (1999).

**Chris:** I was interested in how you came to these social constructionist ideas, and if you at any time felt like the ideas were or would be a detriment to your career, or hurt you professionally in some way?

**Dennis:** Well, that’s interesting, because Stan Witkin and I just gave a faculty development institute at CSWE on post-modern thinking in a

modernist classroom, and we just sort of talk and invite people to participate, we don’t have any papers or anything outlined. But one of the things we did was to talk about how we came to the position that we have in our thinking. And I really had to think hard, because I wasn’t exactly sure how I did it. But I really do think the beginning of it, I don’t know *when* the beginning was, probably very early in my career, was that I used to *rail* against empirical, empiricist, quantitative research. Used to drive me nuts. And the reason was not that – there were some important questions that *could* be answered, I believe that’s true – but that it just bastardized the complexity of human behavior to me. I mean, doing studies about ‘love,’ having people answer a questionnaire about love and then thinking you’re getting even *close* to the complexity and fluidity of an idea like that, with some of those methods, just... I don’t know, it just drove me crazy – and I don’t know where that came from.

**Chris:** I read the article you published in 1979 on those ideas. I don’t remember the title of it now, but you talked about research quite a bit and the insanity of it.

**Dennis:** Oh, *The tension between research and practice*, I think (Saleebey, 1979).

**Chris:** That’s the one.

**Dennis:** Yeah, that idea about tension and research came from Ernest Becker, he was very influential to me. He wasn’t writing about this – he started out studying psychiatry but he became a cultural anthropologist. And he died at a fairly early age, but he wrote some wonderful stuff. *The Denial of Death* (Becker, 2007), is a book that a lot of people know. But other things like *The Structure of Evil* (Becker, 1976) – what he was trying to do was to gather together the threads and remnants of some of the great thinking over the centuries about the nature of human nature and the human condition and how that could be turned into a value-based understanding of human progress. I haven’t said it very well, but his writing was very influential to me. And he *couldn’t* address the use of quantitative research, because you couldn’t do what he was doing with those tools. I mean, what he was doing was philosophical and theoretical and...axiological. I mean, it’s a stunning corpus of work. And that was very influential to me. I thought, well, if there’s going to be better understanding of things, it’s going to come from that sort of thinking. Maybe not quite as broad as that. I mean, I don’t think I could think that broadly, but that’s it.

**Chris:** And there was room for that kind of thinking in your career?

**Dennis:** Well, I've been very lucky, because a lot of people have asked me, "Well, how could you've possibly made a career out of what you have?" I mean, I wouldn't have gotten out of the doctoral program if I never thought about it. When I came out of the doctoral program, I had no expertise in anything! I was not an expert in anything. And nowadays, I mean, the doctoral programs, they make you an expert in some aspect of child welfare, or...which I'm not denigrating – I'm not denigrating that. That's perfectly fine, but – I don't think I could've been trained like that and done it ten years later.

**Chris:** So it sounds to me at the time, when you were a doctoral student and moving up, that there was room for that, for this way of thinking?

**Dennis:** Well, I think more so, yeah. In my doctoral education, we had – now let me see if I get this right – we had four areas of curriculum. And we had to take a year-long course in each of them at the School of Social Welfare. And then we had to take cognate courses in other departments in each of those areas. And then you had some independent study that you could do. It was pretty rigorous, but it was widely based. So, I just started writing about a lot of different stuff. And even in our year-long course in scientific method, I forget what it was called; it was taught by Ernest Greenwood, who was a real stickler, I mean he was *precise* and rigorous. But he also gave us a heavy dose of the philosophy of science. And so even in that course, I could see there were opportunities to think in a slightly different way. Because there's a lot of wonderful writing involved with the philosophy of science. A lot of it I don't understand, but some of it I do. Arguments about the nature of nature, and the nature of evidence, and all that kind of stuff. And that was fun stuff to read. So I guess what I'm saying is that I had to know, I had to know what they wanted us to know to do various courses. But at that time you had the freedom to be either critical or deviant!

**Chris:** (Laughs) Deviant right! Well some think I'm insane doing a qualitative study on social constructionism –

**Dennis:** Well, I don't think that, but the problem with qualitative studies is, God, they take so much time, it's just – if you just did an empirical thing – if you just send out a questionnaire to a bunch of

people and just said, "Answer the following questions," you know, you'd be through. (Chris laughs)

**Chris:** Great. Well, Dennis, thank you very much for your time.

**Dennis:** Sure, I enjoyed it.

**Chris:** Yeah, yeah, and hopefully I'll see you in Vermont again at some point in time.

**Dennis:** You bet.

### Reflections on the Interview

What struck me most about Dennis, and particularly in this interview, was that his brilliance was coupled with an absolute respect for others and an unbending desire to see the positive in everyone. Even as he discussed the DSM and pathology based thinking he maintained a spark of hopefulness that transcended the negativity of his frustration about the field. It is hard to explain without having been in conversation with him, but he was someone who had a way of explaining topics that represented a level of hopelessness, in very hopeful ways.

I was also struck by his ability to recall texts and influential books from as far back as 1976, and to pull knowledge from decades ago to tie into current knowledge. He was a storehouse of strengths-based knowledge and presented it without being in the least bit pretentious about the depth of knowledge that he possessed.

After the interview, Dennis and I continued to stay in contact through email and the Global Partnership of Transformative Social Work. We became distant friends and he was supportive of my career. In fact, it was Dennis who paved the way through his recommendation for my first faculty position. He is greatly missed.

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