You are encouraged to read the whole book, and please make a proper citation if needed.

Parton, N., & O'Byrne, P. (2000). *Constructive social work: towards a new practice*. Macmillan.

What do we mean by 'constructive social work'?

1. We have chosen the term for two reasons. First, we are drawing on what have come to be called constructionist and narrative approaches for both analyzing and understanding social work and more particularly for developing our theoretical insights for practice. (10)
2. While we are using the term metaphorically we do not want to lose its literal meaning, for the core idea of construction, from the Latin to the present day, is that of building or of putting together. (10)
3. It seems we have become so concerned about assessing, managing, planning, monitoring and accounting that we have lost the core of what social workers and social work has to offer in terms of the narrative and interactional processes involved. We need a way of bringing language, listening and talking back in but in a way which is theoretically informed and usable so that we recognize it for what it is – central to social work. (13)
4. Social constructionism as being concerned with a more particular methodological stance, whereas 'postmodernity' is, potentially, much more fundamental in its implications – theoretically, politically and practically. However, concerns related to 'postmodernity' have provided a fertile context in which an interest in constructionism can flourish. (19)
5. While contemporary times have been called variously 'late modern', 'post-industrial', and 'post-traditional' as well as 'postmodern', there is wide agreement on the key elements of social transformation under discussion in terms of: the increasing pace of change; the growing significance of difference, plurality and the growth of various new political movements and strategies; and the pervasive awareness of relativities, the opening up of individual 'choice' and 'freedom' and, which will become central for our purposes, the increasing awareness of the socially constructed nature of reality. (21)
6. Rosenau (1992) has delineated two broad orientations which we feel are helpful in taking our thinking forward: the skeptical postmodernists and the affirmative postmodernists. She argues that skeptical postmodernist offer a distrustful, pessimistic, negative, gloomy assessment of contemporary times characterized by fragmentation, disintegration, meaningfulness, an absence of moral

parameters and social chaos. She calls this the dark side of postmodernism, the postmodernism of despair that speaks of te demise of the subject, the end of the author, the impossibility of truth and the abrogation of the order of representation. It is concerned about the destructive character of modernity and points to unsurpassable uncertainty where no social, political or practical project is worthy of commitment. While the affirmative postmodernists agree with the sceptics' critique of modernity, particularly in terms of science and rationality, they have a more hopeful, optimistic view of the possibilities of the postmodern age and are positively oriented towards the importance of process. They are much more open to the potential for practical actions and are not just concerned with deconstruction but with reconstruction. While they seek a tentative approach to practice there is a central recognition that normative choices and trying to build practical and political coalitions and collaboration lies at the heart of everyday life. In recognizing that subject(s) can only be understood in context(s) it recognizes the importance of interdependence and the social and political cultures in which we live. It is not the death of the subject that is of greatest interest so much as the recognition of the diverse nature of subjectivities which is the focus. (23)

Some theoretical orientations of constructive social work

Narrative and spin

1. J. Bruner (1986) discusses what he calls the two components of narrative, 'landscapes of action' and 'landscapes of consciousness'. The former includes events, linked in sequence over time and following a plot, a 'thematic unfolding of events across time', what is happening and being done. The latter includes interpretations, meaning, reflection on events, thoughts, realizations and conclusions drawn by the characters and by the reader.

Power

2. For Foucault, power and knowledge are linked. There is no exercise of power without a discourse of truth, and knowledge can become a problem when used by the powerful for their purposes. We are all caught in the web and in using it in relation to other people – we are subjugated and we subjugate others. (52)

The text analogy

3. Interpreting an event therefore can be likened to reading a text and each interpretation or reading makes for a new text, a different writing. (53)
4. Gaps in stories are filled partly by new lived experiences and so lives evolve in ways similar to the re-writing of texts; we enter the story and re-story it daily. While we give meaning to life by developing a story it does not freeze there, we

go on shaping our life by living/ reliving the story daily. (54)

Understanding and misunderstanding

5. Derrida (1978) has proposed that meaning is in the difference between words, rather than each word telling us what is meant. What words do not say is probably more important than what they say. Words therefore are two-sided; they mean both what is and what is not; we need to hold on to both – to hold to both/and. Furthermore Derrida maintains that the user's mind has no priority over the meaning of words. (54)
6. Seeking to understand the problem is therefore a futile endless game; far better to accept and use our joint misunderstanding to begin constructing ways of solving the problem. Rather than say 'let me try to understand' we can say 'let me try to misunderstand less.' What the problem is not, or what is happening when the problem is not, leads us to think of exceptions to the problem, and these exceptions help us to see possibilities for change. (56)

Mind your language

7. What we choose to talk about is crucial. If we ask about problems there will be more problems. If we choose to talk about solutions there will be more solutions. (57)

Conservations: for good or ill?

8. We are now aware of the power of what Gergen and Gergen (1986), call 'digressive narratives'. They describe three types of conversations: progressive narratives that imply that service users and situations are moving towards their goals; stability narratives that imply that life is unchanging; digressive narratives that imply that they are moving away from the goals, or backwards. A conservation could be said to be constructive only if one party is working with the other to bring about a state wanted by the other and it is moving in that direction. (59)

Change, difference and agency

9. Talking about what is different, about whether what is happening is different or not, about what people do to make a difference, is central to empowerment…Helping to point out differences not only empowers but increases strengths, potential and confidence, so that people can say they have improved some aspect of their lives. (59)
10. The identification and amplification of personal agency is central to constructive social work. Establishing an ;internal locus of control' is essential for the empowerment especially of those who are victims in various ways, be it of bullies, of violence, of abuse of power by teachers or other professionals. (60)

Past, present or future

11. The most important use of the past however is the search for success and for exceptions to the problem, and an examination of how that was done. Michel White's approach will show some interest in the past in terms of gaining an understanding of how a person was 'recruited' into the problem or into submission to it and whether the person had any influence on that event or not. De Shazer's approach, on the other hand, is primarily future focused. IT sets about building change without seeking to understand the problem; it constructs change in the future by talking about a changed future – change as the service user wants it. (61)

Resistance

12. Since service users already have the seeds of the solutions they need, once they have decided on the goals, workers can help to locate these seeds along with the user. By cooperating with service users in a joint project, resistance dies. (61)
13. In this sense our work is to promote resistance to problems, working alongside service users to defeat them. (62)

Further Orientations towards Constructive Practice:

1. Therefore what is talked about and how problems or solutions are talked about is central to constructive social work. (63)
2. When there is a problem we can look at what is happening or not happening and, without asking 'why?' discuss what needs to not happen or happen – in other words, set goals and start building solutions. (65)
3. However, this approach does not say that the worker has no expertise; workers have expertise in asking helping questions and in co-constructing new stories/reframes of situations that make solution-building possible. They are also trained to challenge self-defeating attitudes, injustice and oppression and have knowledge of how such oppression operate. (68)
4. The start of constructive social work therefore is clear, well-formed goals that are pertinet to the service user. (69)
5. Goals are of their nature belonging to the future, and conversations about that future when they are achieved is in itself a major step towards achieving them. (69)
6. Solutions are therefore built by the dialogue between service user and worker, talking in detail about the exceptions the person has noticed, about how they did that, about what difference it makes, about what others notice and say about it. (71)
7. The core value of this orientation is one of intense respect for individuals' views and efforts, as well as for their potential to help themselves. The approach seeks

to balance this value with a professional stance that opposes injustice and oppression in all their forms and which requires workers to share their views, model appropriate behavior and challenge abuses. (75)

8. Reflexivity: it is reflecting as action happens so that the action is thereby changed as it happens. This is self-reflexivity when it is limited to one's own mind; it can be relational reflexivity when it is shared with service users, when there is talk about what is happening or about ideas being considered.
   - I reflect + I change as I reflect = I am reflexive
   - Relational reflexivity leads to joining with people in creating the service they want, and worker and user having a joint say in how their relationship is going or needs to go. (76)
9. Whereas the conservations in traditional work included the expression of feelings, developing insight and being adversarial towards resistance, possibility work uses conversations of collaboration, of shared expertise, of partnership in goal development and of shared language, in building resistance to the problem. (82)

Some Central Issues for Constructive Social Work

1. Does this mean there is no reality outside language and does it mean we have to abandon any attempts at objectivity? Similarly, how is it possible to argue that values are central to what we do when it seems inappropriate to set down any categorical set of standards? These are clearly important issues. How we understand them has important implications for practice, and important if constructive social work is to be taken seriously. (172)
2. In this respect relativism is often seen as a key assumption of not only 'postmodernism' but also constructionism and that as a result constructionism is also anti-real. As we will argue, however, this is not necessarily so and is not consistent with our position. While we are critical of a naïve realism and would want to encourage an approach which problematises reality, this is not the same as being anti-real and thus cannot be accused of nihilism and moral relativism.
3. In this respect there are aspects of reality which are independent of our experiences, ideas, wishes and language. Such a position can be understand as a minimal or subtle realism as opposed to a naïve realism (Hammersley, 1992). This does not imply any particular theory of truth nor does it depart from the view that facts are theory laden. But it does move us into a much better way of understanding the way constructions and reality and the subjective and objective are related. (172-3)
4. Constructionism can be understood, therefore, as an approach that tries to advance us in our 'objecting'. It aims to demonstrate how we, and others,

subjectively construct more and more meaningful ways of objectively understanding who, what and where we are and how this might be otherwise. In this sense, constructionism is far from being anti-real and lost in mere subjectivism and unending relativism. Certainly the way we understood and use constructions does accept and assert there is a ‘world out there’ but that we have more freedom to interpret, construct and reconstruct it than we may recognize. (177)

5. According to Bauman the social transformations associated with ‘postmodernity’ have laid bare the incurable uncertainty and ambivalence of the human condition, which are so central to the first story (Story of the Garden of Eden). For Bauman the loss of certainties means we can become fully moral, not amoral – the moment of ‘postmodernity’ is not an amoral moment but the opportunity to become fully moral. No longer can we hide behind rules and assume that our obedience makes us good. However, in refusing to hide behind the rules we are fully exposed to the anguish of responsibility and the consequences of our choices. (180)
6. It suggests we shit from a conception of truth as discovery to a conception of truth as process, or put another way, we should focus on the how rather than the what of truth and virtue. In this sense any practice that attempts to claim a constructionist approach will be inherently reflexive – for the what of any system of knowledge and value is entangled in the how of its writing and speaking. (182)