

People experience life through frameworks of meaning they create for themselves—both singly and collectively. With this fundamental postulate, Jonathan D. Raskin lucidly, comprehensively, and sometimes irreverently cuts through the fog of abstraction that often obscures the genuinely novel and exciting contributions a constructive approach makes to the practice of psychotherapy. Synthesizing developments in personal constructivism, coherence theory, social constructionism, narrative therapy, and contextual approaches, this deceptively compact and engagingly readable book invites the reader to imagine how a vast range of human struggles can be dissolved in a heartbeat through a shift of stance or framing. Dozens of diverse case vignettes vividly conjure the transformative power of language and relationship to challenge and change how clients configure their worlds and, with this, themselves. I recommend this volume to all therapists yearning to infuse new vision into their work by experimenting with the principles and procedures of *Constructive Psychotherapies*.

—**Robert A. Neimeyer, PhD**, coeditor, *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*; Director, Portland Institute for Loss and Transition, Portland, OR

Dr. Raskin has succeeded where many others have failed. He has given constructive psychotherapy a clear, vibrant, contemporary voice. In lucid prose, with the use of helpful case examples, Raskin crystallizes how constructive theory and practice combine to simplify and amplify the work of today's clinicians. Others who have attempted this feat have either drifted into abstract philosophy or provided a reductionistic list of disconnected clinical suggestions. For my money, Raskin's eminently readable narrative provides the coherent guide for which we have long been waiting.

—**Jay Efran, PhD**, Professor Emeritus of Psychology, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA

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Introduction

Homo sapiens is the species that invents symbols in which to invest passion and authority, then forgets that symbols are inventions.

—Joyce Carol Oates, “The Calendar’s New Clothes”

This provocative quote succinctly captures the spirit of constructive therapies. Oates’s words remind us that people construct the realities they experience as much as (or more than) they discover them. Constructive therapies, the focus of this book, invite clients to reflexively examine the accounts they have built for themselves—and to entertain new ones when existing accounts back them into a corner. Although thinking constructively potentially opens possibilities, it can also be unsettling because it violates the traditional assumption that experience corresponds to (and is the direct product of) external reality. The outside world is highly salient to people; therefore, their role in making sense of it typically goes

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Constructive Psychotherapies, by J. D. Raskin

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unnoticed. This may explain why human meanings—despite their constructed nature—are not easily trifled with. Because people experience their constructions of the world as real and stable, they cannot simply discard or ignore them: “The way an event is construed and *narratized* becomes virtually inseparable from how it is experienced” (Efran et al., 1990, p. 110).

Consequently, constructive approaches to therapy can initially seem counterintuitive because what people experience often seems directly imposed by an impartial reality, not something they play a role in creating. Yet, in many instances, the constructed “made-upness” of it all seems commonsensical, even obvious. For example, although red traffic lights mean “stop” and green ones mean “go,” there is nothing inherent in those colors that makes this so (Cameron, 2020; Cutolo, 2023). Red and green have been assigned these meanings by human beings. Different designations could just as easily be made. Sticking with colors, pink is commonly associated with girls, and blue with boys. Why? Because people decided this. However, this was not always so. Before World War I, babies were generally dressed in white (Cahn, 2024). The associations of specific colors with gender did not develop until later—and have not always been what they are today. Until the 1940s, pink was for boys, and blue for girls (Cahn, 2024)!

Although their assignment to stoplights and babies’ clothes is a human invention, the red, green, pink, and blue colors themselves must be “true” in a way that goes beyond human invention, right? Not necessarily. Returning to stoplights, Japanese stoplights use what many people would identify as blue rather than green. This is because in Japanese culture, green (*midori*) is considered a specific type of blue (*ao*) rather than a stand-alone color (Spektor, 2023). The implication here is that we individually and culturally sort visual experiences into color categories. These categories are influenced but not determined by wavelengths of light. The structure of our eyes and brains is equally or more important in determining what we see.

The human eye’s three photoreceptors for color vision can only register blue, green, and red light (Hussey et al., 2022). However, the same is not so for vision across all species. The eyes of birds (and maybe reptiles

and fish) have an additional photoreceptor that registers ultraviolet light, which people cannot see. Thus, birds “experience a world awash in extra colors humans can’t imagine” (Fox, 2020, para. 3). These additional colors do not simply make the world prettier for our avian friends. They make it easier for them to spot food, aiding their survival (Fox, 2020). Critically, the color categories various animal species use to divvy up the world reflect the exigencies of their perceptual experience, not a literal reproduction of reality itself. The acronym ROYGBIV (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet) was not discovered in an attic trunk. People made it up because it helped them usefully account for their experience. If birds could talk, they would catalog and label colors quite differently.

Even gender and sex, ideas that seem disinterestedly imposed by the world, might best be viewed as humanly invented templates for organizing experience. In many cultures, the idea that there are two genders is increasingly being challenged—but not just by transgender and nonbinary folks who reject traditional gender distinctions. It is also being contested by scientists, who are realizing that both sex and gender are more complicated than the either/or distinctions that people generally make (Ainsworth & Nature Magazine, 2018; Thomson, 2023; Wilchins, 2004). Gender roles, although influenced by biological differences, are underdetermined by them. As a case in point, economics research has found that in societies in which agriculture historically relied on plow farming (which requires upper body strength), people developed more rigid and less equal gender norms; a strict division of labor evolved in which biological male individuals plowed the fields, whereas biological female individuals handled domestic chores (Alesina et al., 2013). However, in societies in which the plow was not predominant, more flexible gender roles emerged. In other words, notions of gender originate as much from the social and cultural practices people devise as they do from biology.

The constructed nature of sex and gender extends beyond economics and culture into those “hard science” disciplines in which human understandings are commonly viewed as mirrors of (rather than constructions of) reality. Yet, even here, we create as much as we discover—and then, as Joyce Carol Oates reminded us, we reify our invented accounts. To wit,

sex is not as firm an attribute of the external world as we often believe. As many as 5% of animal species can change sex (Thomson, 2023). Worms and snails, for instance, have both male and female sex characteristics, whereas various types of frogs, reptiles, and fish change sexes over the course of their lifetimes (Thomson, 2023). Even in mammals, sex can be fluid. For instance, biological research has suggested that the gonads of mice “teeter” between male and female across their lifespans and must be constantly “maintained” (Ainsworth & Nature Magazine, 2018). With all due apologies to Mickey and Minnie Mouse, the firm male–female dichotomy we have created does not always withstand scrutiny. And things are no clearer in humans than mice. Various forms of atypical human development call into question our notions of sex as an unarguable binary. For example, people we traditionally assume are “truly” male (because they have XY chromosomes) can develop female genitalia if they are insensitive to the male sex hormone androgen (Ainsworth & Nature Magazine, 2018). Taken-for-granted ideas of “male” and “female” are imperfect human accounts that we often mistake for truth itself.

FROM CONSTRUCTIVE THEORIES TO CONSTRUCTIVE THERAPIES

All this suggests that experiential realities are constituted as much or more by the stories people construct and share than by the cold hard facts of their surroundings. Such sentiments reflect the broad contours of *constructive theories*, which contend that people and the social groups they form know the world indirectly through mental templates of their own creation (Burr, 2025; Gergen, 2015; Glasersfeld, 1995; Kelly, 1955a, 1955b; Lyddon, 1995; Raskin, 2002). Although constructive ideas can be found in many disciplines, they have been applied in psychology to areas ranging from perception to personality to education (Kelly, 1955a, 1955b; Maturana & Varela, 1992; Steffe & Kieren, 1994). This book asks: What can constructive theories offer to psychotherapists? Therapists who fall under the constructive moniker are curious about how constructed meanings yield and affect experiential realities. *Constructive therapies*, therefore, disrupt and

reinterpret clients' reified meanings and thereby initiate reconstruction processes that open new possibilities.

This volume introduces you to constructive therapies. These therapies emerged from the proposition that people, alone and in concert with one another, *construct* meaningful understandings of the world, which they use to make sense of their surroundings. Generally, this works seamlessly—so well, mind you, that people regularly mistake their constructions for reality itself. For instance, Sherry¹ blames her relationship difficulties on “daddy issues,” Joaquin attributes his anger outbursts to “impulse control problems,” and Maria insists her career difficulties are the result of “low self-esteem.” Using these terms to make sense of experience is not inherently problematic, but when Sherry, Joaquin, and Maria start reifying “daddy issues,” “impulse control problems,” and “low self-esteem,” respectively, as fundamental truths rather than handy but imperfect human accounts, they can become imprisoned by them. In other words, because the invented nature of our descriptions is so often forgotten or overlooked, we easily find ourselves ensnared in conundrums of our own making. Confusing our constructions with reality is often at the root of mental distress. As philosopher and scientist Alfred Korzybski (1994) famously observed, “A map *is not* the territory” (p. 750). In a nutshell, constructive therapies highlight the human tendency to conflate our linguistic and conceptual maps with the territory. They remind us that we are all cartographers and, in so doing, they conceive of therapy as a process to help clients revise and update their maps so that they will be more useful.

A NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

In keeping with the work of Mahoney (1988, 2003) and Hoyt (1994, 1996), the broader and more inclusive term *constructive therapies* is used throughout this book as opposed to the term *constructivist therapies*. This accounts for the diverse perspectives under the constructive banner that go by different names, including *constructivist*, *social constructionist*, *narrative*,

¹ All cases in this volume use pseudonyms. Client identifying details have also been disguised.

and *postmodern* (Efran et al., 2014; Neimeyer & Mahoney, 1995; Neimeyer & Raskin, 2000; Raskin, 2002; Shotter, 1995). Technically, *constructivism* focuses more on individual meaning-making, whereas *social constructionism* emphasizes social, relational, and collaborative constructive processes. However, in everyday practice, the constructivist–constructionist distinction is often blurry. Therefore, using the term *constructive therapies* allows us to playfully mix and match constructivist and constructionist ideas. Additionally—and just as importantly—it also lets us emphasize the complementary dual definitions of the word *constructive*, which means both “to build up” and “serving a useful purpose” (Google, n.d.). These two definitions wonderfully convey the pragmatic and meaning-focused clinical strategies and techniques discussed throughout this volume.