Is Reality Still Socially Constructed?

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ABSTRACT

This paper traces the rise and fall of "social construction" in sociology. I begin with a brief sketch of its roots in Kantian philosophy, as interpreted by Durkheim and Saussure, and its codification by Berger and Luckmann. I then use a dataset of roughly 350 million words published in 115,000 articles across nineteen journals over 130 years to demonstrate the rise of social construction in the late-1960s, its peak around 2000, and the recent decline of the last fifteen years. I conclude with a discussion of possible explanations for this decline and suggest fruitful theoretical alternatives.

Keywords: social construction, text analysis, bibliometrics, social ontology

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1 Introduction

> [They] are ready to insist that no one of these things has by nature any being of its own; in respect of these, they say, what seems to people collectively to be so is true, at the time when it seems that way and for just as long as it so seems, (Plato, *Theaetetus* 172b).

What does it mean to say that something is "socially constructed"? And is this a useful thing to say? Ian Hacking (1999) asked these questions at (what I will show was) the height of social constructionist thought in sociology. I ask a slightly different question: useful or not, are sociologists still using the phrase "social construction" today? Why or why not? What can we learn from the rise and fall of this concept?

There are four parts to this paper. First, I provide a brief sketch of the pre-history of social construction. How did we get here? Where did this idea come from? In short, I trace the influence of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* through Durkheim's sociology of knowledge and Saussure's linguistic relativism. While there are many other paths (and comprehensive works on this topic), I argue these three intellectual moves drive significant traffic to social constructionist thought. Second, I provide an account of the rise of social construction with the release of Berger and Luckmann's 1966 book *The Social Construction of Reality* and the uptake of this idea in (most) sociological circles, especially social problems and critical sociology. Third, I demonstrate the rise and fall of this concept in sociology using a dataset of roughly 115,000 articles and book reviews from nineteen journals that span 130 years. I show the rise of social constructionist thought in the late-1960s, the peak around 2000, and the decline in the last fifteen years. In the last part of this paper I explore possible explanations for this decline, including adoption, rejection, refinement, and cyclical fatigue; and highlight a few alternatives to social construction, including analytical sociology, critical realism, pragmatist sociology, and social ontology.

One danger of a successful neologism is the departure from its intended meaning. Words and phrases take on a life of their own once in the hands of many. Much like Abend (2008) calls for a "semantic therapy" around the use of the word "theory" in sociology, I argue it is time for a postmortem on "social construction".

2 The Roads to Social Construction

Much has been said about the history of social constructionist thought. Readers wanting a complete picture will find impressive books (Burr 2015; Hacking 1999), chapters

(Abbott 2001; Martin 2015; Smith 2011), and articles (Steets 2016; Vera 2016b) on the topic. Here, I sketch an overview of the main roads to social constructionist thought, especially in the field of sociology. Before proceeding, it is important to acknowledge the contingency (or perhaps "social construction") of clean historical accounts, especially about something as immaterial as the development of intellectual movements. As Abbott (1988, p. 281) warns: "To search for all the causal ancestors, or causal descendants, of a given event is merely a rhetorical convenience." A more appropriate historical narrative "must follow the blind alleys as well as the thoroughfares by which history produced the present." While there are many blind alleys to follow, I present three thoroughfares in the journey towards social constructionist thought.

2.1 Kant: From Reality to Knowledge

To make a claim about social construction is to make a metaphysical claim. It is to distinguish between reality and human reality. This simple distinction is philosophically fraught and goes back at least to Protagoras in the 5th-century BCE when he said "man is the measure of all things". This relativism becomes the foil of Plato who famously sought the objective truth of Forms—though he at times flirts with the mediated nature of our perceptions.[1] Medieval thinkers continued this line of thought with debates about nominalism and the problem of universals (Berman 2020).

In the 17th- and 18th-century, empiricists like Locke and Hume tried to distinguish *primary qualities* like form and substance from *secondary qualities* like color and weight. Our variable perception of secondary qualities suggests there must be an element of reality that is dependent on the person.[2] While clearly capturing some truth about the world, later thinkers would question this arbitrary distinction between primary substance and secondary properties (Marmodoro and Mayr 2019).

Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* of 1781 drew a firm boundary between what is real (*noumena*; the things-in-themselves) and what we can know (*phenomena*; our perceptions). The world that we experience is necessarily and forever mediated by our human faculties, including our sense perceptions (as Locke and Hume argued) but also our mental structures of time, space, and causality. As his later disciple Schopenhauer (2010, p. 23) put it eloquently: "One is not acquainted with either the sun or the earth, but rather only with an eye that sees a sun, with a hand that feels an earth." This move

[1] "Think now. Is it more correct to say that the eyes are that with which we see, or that through which we see? Do we hear with the ears or through the ears?" (*Theaetetus* 184c).

[2] This doctrine was taken to the extreme by Berkeley's idealism: when you close your eyes, the world—in some significant way—ceases to exist.

traded ontology for epistemology. It allowed empirical science of the 1700s to sidestep difficult metaphysical questions, at the cost of keeping "true reality" always out of arm's reach.[1]

2.2 Durkheim: From Knowledge to Language

Writing about 100 years later in early 20th-century France, Durkheim inherited an interpretation of Kant's categories that he found overly individualistic and psychological. Social scientists at the time "treated the categories as belonging to some sort of conceptual scheme or framework through which we perceive the world, rather than as Aristotle's highest predicables or Kant's concepts that are logically presupposed by experience," (Schmaus 2004, p. 1). In this context, Durkheim sought to ground these categories empirically and, more radically, to show their origin in collective social practices. In their 1903 paper on primitive classification, Durkheim and Mauss famously asserted "the classification of things reproduces the classification of men." Basic systems of dividing the world like genus, species, and cardinal directions were based on the group's understanding of itself, its tribe members, and the spatial location of various tribes. The social origins of these (classificatory) categories promised to ground our very perceptions in the new discipline of sociology, and subsequent articles in *L'Année sociologique* argued along similar lines (Bloor 1982).

Durkheim's *Elementary Forms* ([1912] 1995) contains his most ambitious treatment of the topic. He sets out to prove the social origin of six categories: time, space, classification, force, causality, and totality. For example, *time* comes from the seasonal and daily rhythms of social life and *space* is patterned after the distribution of social groups. Importantly, Durkheim's fascination with the social does not preclude a thin (individual) realism: "the relations that the categories express exist, in an implicit manner, in individual consciousnesses" (1995, p. 441). However, he goes on to say that the solitary individual has no need (or ability) to generalize beyond their immanent experience. "There is no individual experience, no matter how broad or prolonged, that could make us even suspect the existence of a whole genus embracing the universality of beings," (ibid., p. 442). It is only through the need to communicate with others, and the totalizing model of society, that generalization and abstraction from individual experience is possible. Thus, the social origin of the categories.

Although here the distinction between Durkheim's project and Kant's project often get

[1] For a detailed account of the Kantian roots of social construction, see (Hacking 1999, p. 42) and (Elder-Vass 2012, pp. 244–250).

lost, namely the difference between Kantian categories and cultural classifications.

> "For Kant, it was only the categories in this highest sense that structured human judgment and perception. When categories are not carefully distinguished from classificatory and other concepts, serious confusions may arise about purported cultural differences in the categories and the effects of these differences on perception and understanding. Systems of natural classification and ways of dividing and measuring space and time may be culturally variable, while the categories themselves are not. For there to be cultural variability in the categories, there would have to be cultures that had no conception whatsoever of, say, space, time, causality, or classification," (Schmaus 2004, p. 6).

Kant himself distinguished between the transcendental aesthetic, or *perception*, and the transcendental analytic, or *intellection*. According to Martin (2021, p. 116), "Durkheim rejected this distinction and fused what Kant considered separate, namely, concepts that one thinks and objects one perceives."[1] Next, Durkheim moves from concepts to language. Much of the *Elementary Forms* describes the use of totems and other symbolic objects as (collective) representations of abstract concepts. A totem becomes the symbol of the group itself and comes to evoke feelings of sacredness and solidarity, for example. But this representational system reaches its zenith in language: "The system of concepts with which we think in everyday life is the one the vocabulary of our mother tongue expresses, for each word translates a concept," (Durkheim 1995, p. 435).[2]

In short, Durkheim took inspiration from Kant's philosophical project and outlined a theory of how our individual perceptions become organized in socially-derived conceptual frameworks which are then crystalized and communicated through socially-derived linguistic systems. This move influenced subsequent thinkers in his own time, like Saussure, but also reaches directly to the present to give support for modern social constructionist approaches (Rawls 1996, p. 473).

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[1] Rawls (1996) offers a more charitable view, wherein the empirical epistemology of the central chapters of the *Elementary Forms* is to be kept separate from the idealist sociology of knowledge of the introduction and conclusion chapters. On this reading, Durkheim's sociology of knowledge concerns the culturally variable relationships between systems of ideas, while his epistemology asserts that the categories "have empirical validity because they are perceived directly as social or moral forces during the enactment of social (religious) practice," (ibid., p. 438).

[2] For a critique, see Martin (2021, 141n45): "Pigeons can be trained to recognize the concept of tree...[and] pigeons—one hopes this will not evoke further controversy—lack the word *tree*."

2.3 Saussure: From Language to Convention

Saussure was a French-speaking Swiss linguist and contemporary of Durkheim. Though he died in 1913, his lecture notes were published posthumously as *Course in General Linguistics* in 1916; a foundational text in 20th century linguistics and postmodern thought. According to Saussure, at the elementary level, all language is made up of signs which consist of both the signifier (the word "tree") and the signified (the concept of *tree*). Saussure held that the relationship between signifier and signified was not defined by necessity but rather the result of an arbitrary cultural agreement. Furthermore, the meaning (or "value") of a sign is not defined exclusively by its referent (the signified) but by its relation to other signs. In other words, language is not a stack of flashcards connecting words and concepts, but a dense and interconnected system. We understand the word *tree* [large, alive, plant] in relation to other words, like *log* [once-alive tree without roots or branches]. The word *lumberjack* derives its meaning from [tree, economy, occupation] and evolves into *logger* with the arrival of mechanical tools, etc. Thus, for Saussure, language exists in an arbitrary relation to the world; a social system for universalizing abstract concepts that derive their meaning from other concepts.

As others have documented, Saussure's system was explicitly inspired by Durkheim's Kantian project (Rawls 1996, p. 473; Jameson 1972, pp. 27–28; Martin 2021, p. 113). Saussure's distinction between the expansive, supra-individual language system (*langue*) and the individual use of, or participation in, that system (*parole*), closely mirrors Durkheim's collective vs. individual representations and similarly asserts the existence of large and irreducibly social forces in which the individual is embedded. While his influence is felt less in sociology than Durkheim, Saussure's work influenced a range of important thinkers in linguistics, anthropology, comparative literature, and postmodern circles, which also tend to source the most vocal proponents of social constructionist thought (Smith 2011; Tallis 1995).

Thus, from Kant to Durkheim to Saussure, we see a chain of transitive substitutions whereby reality is reduced to our knowledge which is reduced to our concepts which are reduced to our language which is reduced to our arbitrary social conventions. Therefore, in extreme form, reality is nothing but our social conventions, or "reality is socially constructed".

But, as Smith (2011, p. 149) argues, each of these moves collapses important distinctions. We hope that our knowledge captures a large portion of reality, but there are real things we do not (and perhaps cannot) know. We hope that our language captures a large portion of our conceptual experience, but there are things we do not (and

perhaps cannot) express through language like music, color, scents, or any other non-propositional knowledge (Martin 2015, pp. 116–128). Formally, we could say that each move expresses not an identity relation but a proper subset relation, such that:

$$Convention \subset Language \subset Concepts \subset Knowledge \subset Reality \tag{1}$$

The extent to which one favors identity over subset relations here gives rise to the "strong" vs. "weak" continuum of social constructionist thought.

3 The Rise of Social Construction

As I said above, there are many other roads to social constructionist thought. Ambitious students of this concept could mine the pre-Kantian tradition going all the way back to Plato or Protagoras. In fact, Saussure's argument about the conventionality of language is a version of the argument taken by Hermogenes in Plato's *Cratylus*.[1] In sociology, these roads ultimately lead to Berger and Luckmann (1966); the book that introduced this idea to mainstream sociology.[2] The influence of Kant is channeled through their reference to Durkheim, and their phenomenological perspective shares much in common with Saussure. The authors are more explicit in their debt to Alfred Schütz (Luckmann's mentor at The New School) who traces a lineage through the phenomenological tradition of Husserl and others, ultimately leading to Kant's student Johann Gottfried Herder and his work on linguistic relativism — a forerunner to Saussure.

There is no shortage of commentary on Berger and Luckmann's classic text. In 2016, at least two journals ran special issues on the fiftieth anniversary. The first, in *Cultural Sociology* includes an editorial introduction (Vera 2016b), interviews with both Berger (Vera 2016a) and Luckmann (Dreher and Vera 2016), and a masterful commentary and analysis by Alan Sica (2016). Quoting Berger in 2009, who remarks:

> Perhaps the word 'construction' . . . was unfortunate, as it suggests a creation ex nihilo—as if one said, 'There is nothing but our constructions.' But this was not the authors' intention . . . What they proposed was that all reality was subject to socially derived interpretations, (Berger and Zijderveld 2009, p. 66).

[1] "No name belongs to a particular thing by nature, but only because of the rules and usage of those who establish the usage and call it by that name," (Plato *Cratylus* 384d).

[2] While Berger and Luckmann received most attention, Holzner (1968) covered similar ground.

Sica continues: "Had they more accurately titled the book *The Social Interpretation of Reality*, there would almost surely not be celebrations of its 50th birthday, despite its intrinsic value otherwise," (Sica 2016, p. 40).

A second commemorative issue in *Human Studies* includes an editorial introduction (Endreß and Nicolae 2016) and a detailed sociological critique of the philosophical critique of Hacking and Searle (Endreß 2016). One looking for contextualization could hardly improve on Steets's (2016) article, which draws on multiple re-readings of the text (in German and English), reviews of the book upon its publication, a history of the New School in the 1960s, Berger's autobiography, and multiple interviews. According to Abbott (2001), the book merged the German idealist tradition of "constitutive constructionism" with the European "ideological constructionism" of Marx and Mannheim. As Berger himself describes:

> In 1966, when the book came out, there was a broad dissatisfaction with what had been the long hegemony of structural functionalism theory and a narrow positivism in the day-to-day practice of most sociologists. Especially younger people in the discipline were looking for something new, something that would transcend the aridity of both Parsonian scholasticism and the endless refinements of quantitative techniques. Something new was indeed about to engulf sociology, but it was not the marriage of Weber and Schutz celebrated in *The Social Construction of Reality*. It was, of course, the orgy of ideology and utopianism that erupted all over the academic scene in the late 1960s, almost immediately after the publication of our book. Neither Luckmann nor I had any sympathy with this Zeitgeist, but even if we had been more sympathetic, our sort of sociology was not what all these putative revolutionaries were clamoring for. It is not possible to play chamber music at a rock festival, (Berger 1992).

Aside from the general zeitgeist that "erupted" after its publication, the book had a more generative influence on specific subfields, including organizational and neo-institutional theory (Hirsch and Boal 2000), criminology and labeling theory (Abbott 2001), and the study of social problems (Loseke 2017). The latter influence is often traced to Spector and Kitsuse's *Constructing Social Problems* (1977), which was the subject of a special issue in *The American Sociologist* (see Spector 2019). Here Nichols (2019) provides a helpful narrative on how the constructionist framework gained traction in social psychology and symbolic interaction while facing attacks from more materialist and conflict-oriented parts of sociology. Best (2019) and Christensen (2019) offer a critique of con-

structionism from within the social problems tradition, arguing that the perspective takes attention away from the marginalized and neglects structural factors, while Ibarra (2019) offers suggestions for improvement.

Alas, this paper is not intended as a comprehensive genealogy, nor an attempt to "straighten out" social construction. Other works in the field provide this (Burr 2015; Elder-Vass 2012; Hacking 1999). Instead, I want to empirically examine the career of this concept in sociology. Works on this topic often mention the proliferation of this theory into all substantive areas of academic life. Hacking (1999) calls social construction "both obscure and overused" (pvii), "common coin" (p2), and "on the warpath for over three decades" (p3). In one notable sentence, he says, “For all their power to liberate, those very words ‘social construction’ can work like cancerous cells. Once seeded, they replicate out of hand,” (p3). Smith (2011, p. 133) mirrors Hacking’s lament as they both disparagingly collect long alphabetical lists of recent books on "the social construction of X".

Partly inspired by Hacking’s critique, Knoblauch and Wilke (2016) examine the diffusion of social construction to other disciplines by analyzing data from Google Ngram and the Web of Science Core Collection. In their Google Ngram dataset (which ends in 2008), they note "In 1998 [the use of ’social construction’] is 3.5 times as high as in 1987. Since then, its use has been in slow decline" (ibid., p. 54). With particular attention to suffixes and their distinction, they also note, "’social constructionism’ has been in decline since about 2000...[while] ’social constructivism’ as a phrase takes the lead around this time and is still rising to higher levels," (ibid., p. 55). Furthermore, their Web of Science dataset, which tracks citations across all academic publications, reveals continued growth up to 2015 (where their data ends).

This article takes up Hacking’s questions anew and extends the empirical work of Knoblauch and Wilke (ibid.) with refined analytical procedures, sociology-specific samples, and updated data. Is this "cancerous" proliferation true in sociology? When did it start? Have these sharp critiques of the last 10-20 years made an impact? Has the reported growth continued? In short, is reality still socially constructed?

4 Data & Analysis

My analysis proceeds in two studies. In the first study I examine the full text of three generalist, well-cited sociology journals with a long publication history: *American Journal of Sociology* (founded 1895), *Social Forces* (1925), and the *American Sociological Review*

Journal	Years	Articles	Unigrams	Bigrams
Am. Journ. Soc.	1895-2018	5256	6.99m	24.4m
Social Forces	1925-2024	6002	6.99m	23.9m
Am. Soc. Rev.	1936-2024	5533	7.36m	25.3m
Total		16791	21.3m	73.6m

Table 1: Study 1 — Descriptive summary

(1936). I collected this data in early 2025 from Constellate[1] — a project from the non-profit organization ITHAKA, which also owns and manages the research repositories JSTOR and Portico. Constellate allowed users to build custom datasets of metadata and ngrams for more than 38 million books and journals. Constellate grew out of JSTOR's "Data for Research" (see Bernau 2018) and underwent a configuration change in July of 2025. Table 1 provides summary statistics for study 1.

In the second study I expand my analysis to include sixteen additional[2] sociology journals, whose articles I group into four categories: generalist, substantive, book reviews, and teaching. I collected this data in early 2026 from JSTOR's Text Analysis Support[3] — the successor to Constellate. This platform requires users to download a JSON file with metadata for all 12.5 million records on JSTOR, isolate the item IDs desired for full-text analysis, and submit a request to generate a full-text database which is reviewed and approved by their staff. This transition was likely in response to heightened concern over the responsible use of copyright text material with artificial intelligence and large language models. Table 2 provides summary statistics for study 2.

In brief, both studies required identifying relevant records, joining metadata with text data (ngrams for study 1, a list strings for each automatically-transcribed page for study 2), cleaning data (un-listing lists, converting to lowercase, and removing punctuation, numbers, and stop words), and removing duplicate or incorrect records. Detailed descriptions of these procedures can be found in Appendix 1.

4.1 Study 1: Analysis and Results

Using data from the *American Journal of Sociology*, *Social Forces*, and the *American Sociological Review*, I used a regular expression to identify the use of any variation of the phrase

[1] `https://www.constellate.org`

[2] I include *AJS* and *ASR* again in study 2 for a total of eighteen journals. *Social Forces* was not available in the dataset for study 2. At times in the paper I refer to the whole paper as analyzing nineteen journals: eighteen in study 2 plus *Social Forces* in study 1.

[3] https://support.jstor.org/hc/en-us/articles/32479181127575-JSTOR-Text-Analysis-Support-Getting-Started

Journal	Years	Articles	Book Reviews	Total Words
American Journal of Sociology	1895-2019	5345	17457	54.4m
American Sociological Review	1936-2022	5690	7091	45.8m
Annual Review of Sociology	1975-2019	961	0	10.8m
Contemporary Sociology	1972-2022	0	24625	25.4m
European Journal of Sociology	1960-2019	907	382	10.0m
International Social Science Review	1925-2020	2643	4992	11.7m
Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion	1961-2019	2266	2473	17.0m
Journal of Health and Social Behavior	1967-2022	1871	92	14.4m
Journal of Marriage and Family	1964-2019	4633	1458	33.3m
Race, Gender & Class	1993-2018	846	55	5.9m
Signs	1975-2019	2054	1334	16.9m
Social Psychology Quarterly	1937-2022	2639	48	15.8m
Sociology of Education	1927-2022	3681	1425	16.6m
Teaching Sociology	1973-2022	1753	1836	11.5m
The American Sociologist	1965-2021	1964	17	10.4m
The British Journal of Sociology	1950-1998	1333	3326	13.2m
The Canadian Journal of Sociology	1975-2021	1002	1939	10.2m
Theory and Society	1974-2021	1250	470	16.5m
Total		40838	69020	339.7m

Table 2: Study 2 — Descriptive summary

social construction. Specifically, I used the command "`social[:alpha:]* construct`" to identify any string that contained the word *social*, followed by any number of alphabetical characters, followed by a space, followed by the word *construct* with any suffix. This pattern was compared to each of the 73.6 million bigram rows and the matches and their counts were joined to the respective metadata file. Of the 2112 total matches, Table 3 highlights the top ten word-pairs and their respective counts in the dataset. Each phrase captures or evokes the central idea of social construction despite presenting slightly different concepts.

For each journal-year, I divided these counts by the total number of articles to create a proportion, or average word use per article per journal-year. This helps account for the fact that different years have different journal coverage (i.e. *AJS* coverage stops at 2018, *ASR* begins in 1936). Figure 1 shows the evolution and use of social constructionist language in this sample from 1895 to 2024, where each point represents the average word-use for that journal-year, with journals color-coded and a locally estimated scatterplot smoothing (LOESS) curve applied.

The picture here is clearly one of pre- and post- Berger and Luckmann. Before 1966, there were 43 tentative and entrepreneurial uses of the phrase, including the first-documented use by Lester Ward in his 1905 *AJS* paper "Evolution of Social Structures":

> "A structure is something that has been constructed, and a study of social structure is the study of a process and not a product. Our task, therefore, is not to examine the various products of social construction, but to inquire into the methods of social construction," (Ward 1905, p. 589).

Other articles that use the phrase more than once include Fenton (1911) who uses the phrase *socially constructive* three times as an antonym for *anti-social*, Rose and Willoughby (1958) who use *social constructs* twice as a heading in a table to group "living standards, community, social stratification, and individuation and mobility", and Krader and Aird (1959) who cite someone else's publication on *socialist construction* in their article about demography in China. The rest of the pre-1966 uses occur only once per article and are of similarly sporadic use.

Figure 2 takes a closer look at the post-1966 use of social constructionist language. Between 1970 and 1990, each journal goes through a period of diffusion and adoption. The years between 1990 and 2010 appear to have been a high-water mark for social construction. Notably, the last fifteen years have seen an unambiguous decline in social

string	count
social construction	1182
socially constructed	445
social constructionist	102
social constructions	84
social constructivist	56
social construct	35
social constructionists	33
social constructionism	31
social constructs	31
socially construct	19
. . .	. . .
Total (N = 46)	2112

Table 3: Word-pair counts in Study 1

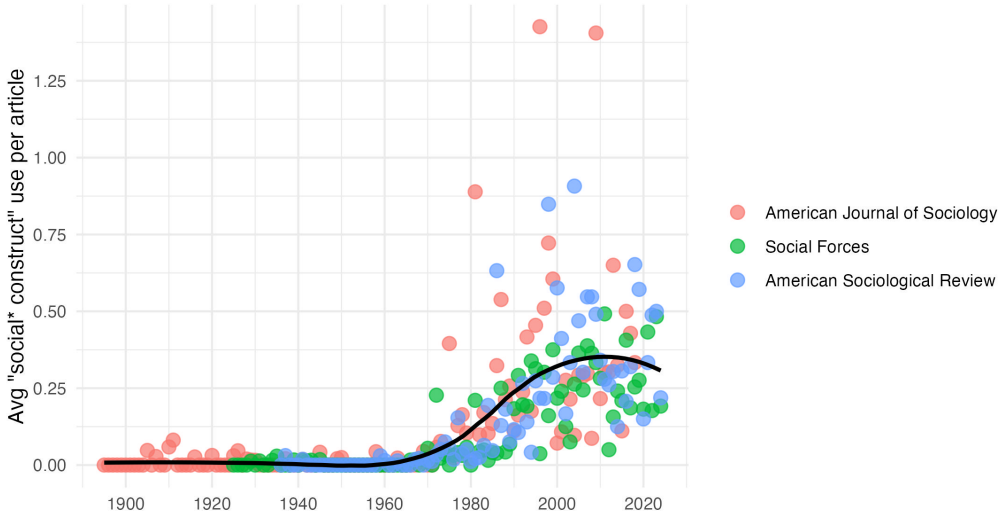

Figure 1: Use of "social* construct"

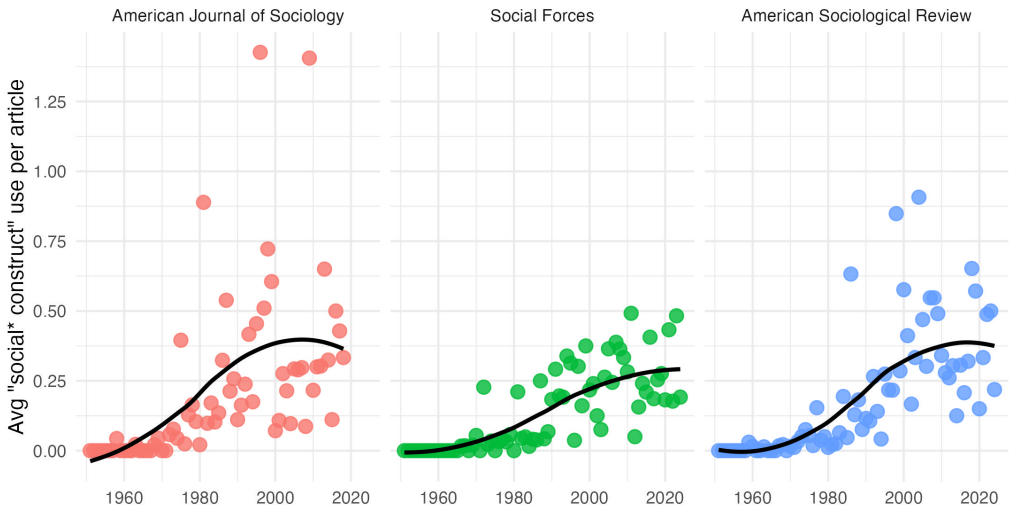

Figure 2: Use of "social* construct"

constructionist language from both *AJS* and *ASR*. *Social Forces* had a slower adoption, longer peak, and softer decline in recent years.

The highest articles by count provide important insights into the use of social construction. I review a few of these below. In their *AJS* article, Lynn, Podolny, and Tao (2009) explore the tenuous relationship between social status and underlying qualities. Rather than simply asserting this relationship arbitrary and calling status "socially constructed", they proceed to examine when and where this relationship is more or less arbitrary due to quality uncertainty, concerns for reciprocity, self-fulfilling prophecies, and other factors. Their article is an important step towards developing social construction as an analytical framework rather than mere disciplinary conviction:

> Despite or perhaps because of the strength of this disciplinary conviction, we rarely consider the contextual factors or mechanisms that influence the magnitude of social construction. Arguing that construction exists is distinct from understanding the conditions that foster or suppress construction in a particular context. Developing a more contingent conception of social construction will give our disciplinary rallying cry more explanatory leverage. This article represents one step in that broad agenda (ibid., p. 756).

In their *ASR* article, Pescosolido and Mendelsohn (1986) discuss the social construction of official suicide statistics and whether this hinders their use in sociological theory-testing. In other top articles, Kemper (1981) compares social constructionist and posi-

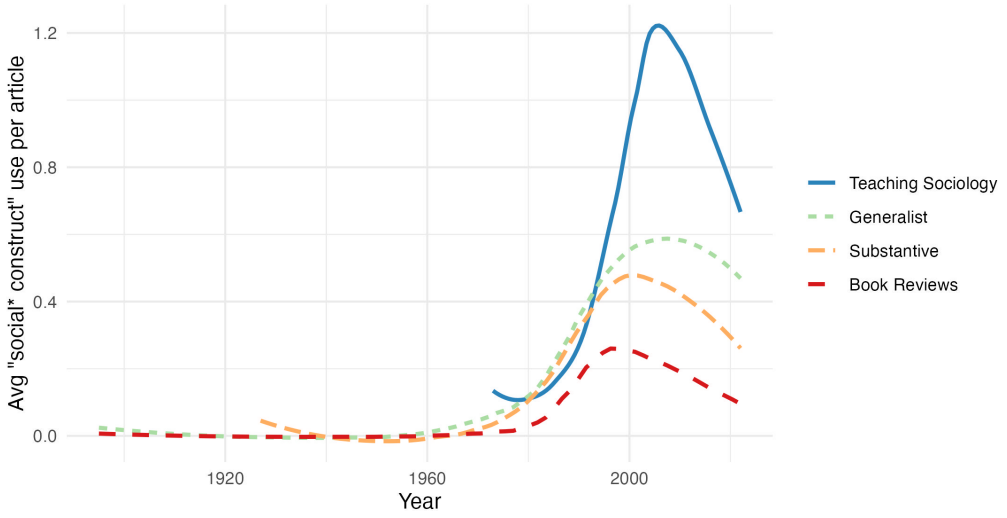

Figure 3: Use of "social* construct" in sociology by category (N = 109,858)

tivist approaches to emotions, Zajac and Westphal (2004) discuss the social construction of financial market behavior via institutional logics, and Katz (1996) explores the role of intergenerational family dynamics in the social construction of humor.

4.2 Study 2: Analysis and Results

The second study expands this analysis to include sixteen additional journals with separate samples for research articles (N = 40,838) and book reviews (N = 69,020). As in study 1, I used a regular expression "`social[:alpha:]* construct`" to count the variants of social constructionist language and grouped by journal-year to produce a proportion, or average word-use per article per journal-year. I group these results into four categories: 1) generalist, 2) substantive, 3) book reviews, and 4) teaching. Figure 3 provides trend lines for each of these four categories between 1895 and 2022, which I examine in more detail below. In short, each category shows a rise in social constructionist language beginning in the mid-1960s, peaking around the late-1990s or early-2000s, with a marked decline after 2010.

Figure 4 provides descriptive trends of eight generalist journals post-1960 with independent y-axes and a dotted line in 1999 for reference. This appears to be the peak of social constructionist language throughout study 2.[1] *AJS* and *ASR* show similar trends to study 1, with slight differences likely due to expanded coverage, different handling

[1] As reported by Knoblauch and Wilke 2016 and incidentally the year Hacking's critique was published.

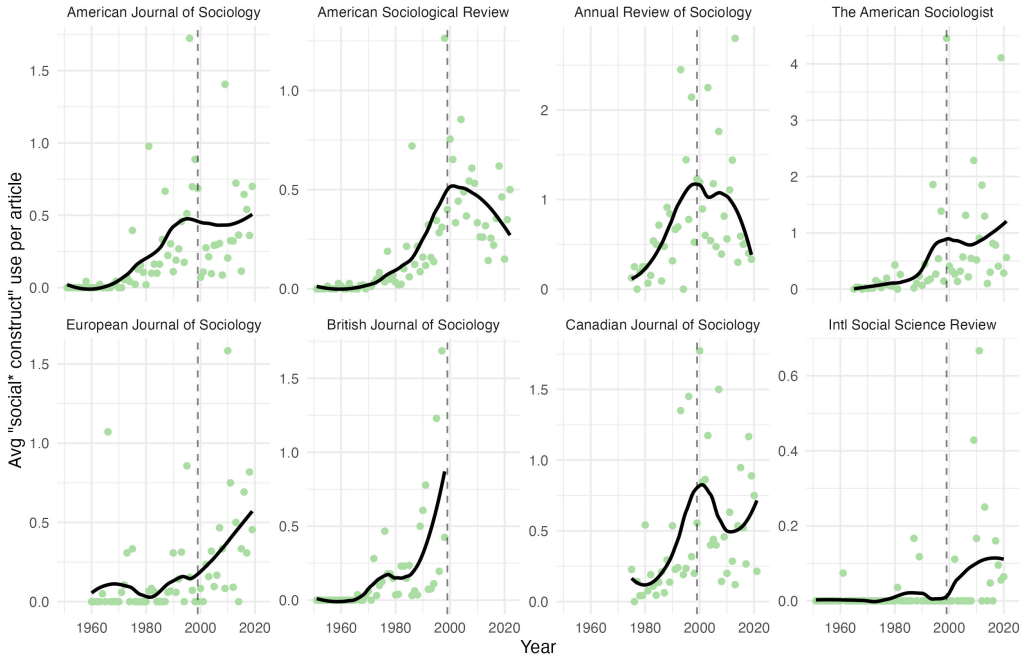

Figure 4: Use of "social* construct" in generalist sociology journals (N = 19,845)

of references, or discrepancies in the optical character recognition (OCR) process. Data for *The British Journal of Sociology* ends in 1998 but appears to follow a similar pattern. Data for *The Canadian Journal of Sociology* and *The American Sociologist* both show a peak around 1999 but have experienced a slight uptick in recent years, the latter likely due to the special issue cited above (Nichols 2019). The two exceptions to this trend include the *The European Journal of Sociology* and *International Social Science Review*, although the absolute scale of the latter is quite small. However, what if social construction, having once had prominence in generalist sociology, now maintains a thriving agenda in journals with a more specific substantive focus?

Figure 5 provides descriptive trends of eight substantive journals post-1960 with independent y-axes and a dotted line in 1999 for reference. Each of these eight journals exhibit the overall pattern, with local peaks around 2000 and marked decline in the last fifteen years. This includes the journal *Race, Gender, & Class* and the feminist journal *Signs: Journal of Women and Culture in Society*. However, what if social construction, having once had prominence in professional journal articles, now maintains a thriving presence in monographs or book chapters? Or, if not in professional writing, perhaps social construction lives on in the classroom as a useful teaching aid?

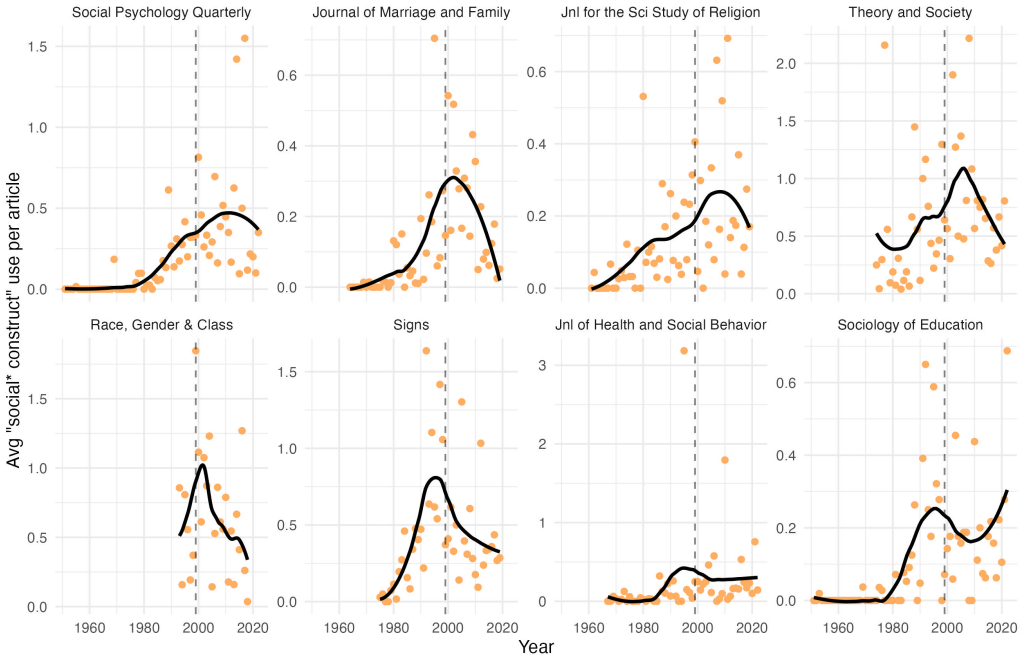

Figure 5: Use of "social* construct" in substantive sociology journals (N = 19,240)

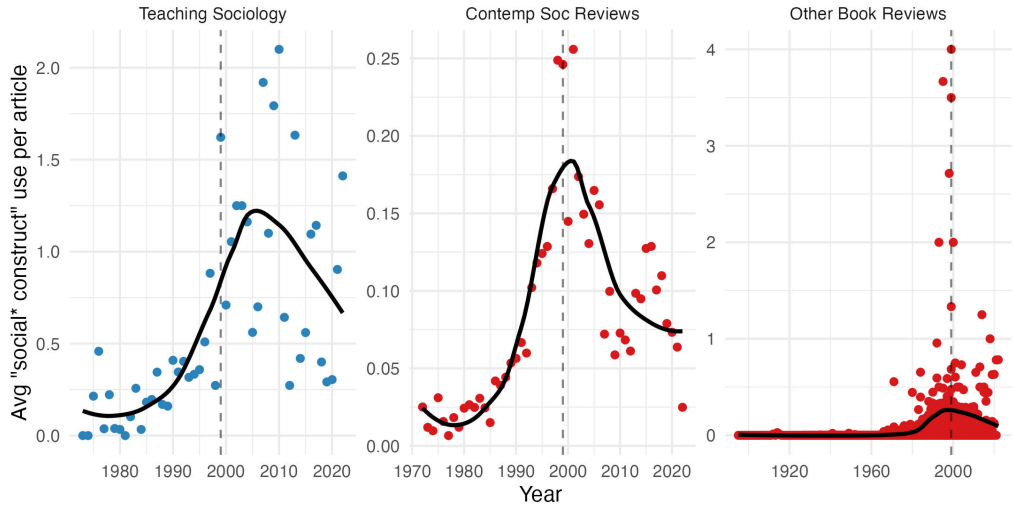

Figure 6: Use of "social* construct" in teaching and book reviews (N = 70,773)

Figure 6 provides descriptive trends of the journal *Teaching Sociology*, book reviews that appeared in *Contemporary Sociology: A Journal of Reviews*, and all other book reviews that appeared in the other sixteen journals in study 2. These all conform to the pattern seen above.[1]

5 Discussion

5.1 Why the Decline?

This paper provides descriptive evidence of the recent decline in social construction language. While a full explanatory account of the decline of social construction is beyond the scope of this article, I suggest a few potential arguments.

Adoption First, a social construction optimist could say that the idea has simply become accepted as orthodoxy in mainstream sociology. As one colleague put it: "Conflict is noisy, victory is quiet." Perhaps after decades of championing the idea, sociologists today simply have no need to evoke such a commonly-held assumption, in the same way that Berger and Luckmann use quotes around "reality" at the beginning of their book, but by the end simply use *reality*, or the way that physicists today do not clarify that every material object they study is "made of atoms".

Rejection Alternatively, more critical observers might say the decline is due to intrinsic contradictions. After a handful of sustained critiques, maybe scholars are more wary of using the phrase. Hacking (1999) warns that social construction is a way of smuggling in normative statements ("things should be otherwise") that pose as ontological or scientific statements. Abbott (2001) warns that social construction is a useful tool to critique orthodoxy, but becomes a liability when trying to defend the new orthodoxy from the next generation of social constructionist critiques. Latour (2004) similarly warns against being social constructionists about things we do not like and realists about things we do. Smith (2011) warns against the collapsing of reality in the Kantian genealogy described above. Martin (2021) rejects Durkheim and Saussure's conceptually-mediated picture of human cognition.

Refinement A third explanation of the decline might say that social construction lacks explanatory purchase. As Lynn et al. (2009) describe, social construction often amounts

[1] See Appendix 2 for a confirmation that these trends are independent of citation behavior.

to little more than a disciplinary rallying cry. Yes, sociology is about things that are "socially constructed", but who is the "social" and why, when, and how are they doing the "constructing"? Even if physicists no longer qualify everything as "made of atoms", nor do biologists remind us every organisms is "made of cells", their professional work is still about the specific configuration, behavior, and consequences of this or that arrangement of atoms or cells. Lynn et al. (2009) provide a helpful move towards an "analytical" social constructionism, as does Shaw (2015) who uses agent-based modeling to elaborate on Berger and Luckmann's plausibility structures in a network environment.

Cyclical fatigue Lastly, one could synthesize each of these explanations, take professional sociology as a "community of discourse" (Wuthnow 1989), and say that the conversation has simply moved on. Some have adopted, some have rejected, and some have refined the concept, but in all three cases (or communities) there is simply no need for the phrase itself anymore. Knoblauch and Wilke (2016) argue that while Berger and Luckmann remain "the common denominator", the malleability of social construction led to widespread diffusion wherein the framework may have collapsed under the weight of it's "varieties" (Stam 2002). Abbott (2001) argues that disciplines (especially sociology) proceed in a fractal pattern wherein theoretical dichotomies are asserted (structure vs. agency, micro vs. macro, constructionist vs. realist, etc.), sides are taken, and as one side enjoys hegemony for a generation or two, the other sides eventually "brings back" the competing side. Thus, the discipline can claim perpetual progress while also drawing support from its historical tradition. Levine (1995) takes a less pessimistic view but similarly asserts a vision of "dialogical sociology" that is able to draw from and employ a range of theoretical perspectives without enforcing uniformity. Further work could explore the contours of this decline in more detail.

5.2 Now What? Alternatives to Social Construction

Given these arguments for decline, what explains the persistence of social construction in the first place? Well, despite its philosophical imprecision and the contradictions of some "strong" versions, there is clearly something true about social construction. At its most obvious, social construction could simply mean that our independent variables; the things on the right side of the regression equation; the explanantia, include social factors. To deny social construction is to deny the possibility of social science itself! Furthermore, what is the alternative? Are gender roles written into the fabric of reality? Are we all supposed to be essentialists now? There are many alternatives to social construction that take the social world seriously, and I present a few here.

Analytical sociology While not exactly *against* social construction, analytical sociology goes beyond the simple rallying cry in search of detailed mechanisms and causal pathways between social factors and outcomes of interest. This approach is often paired with careful distinction between micro-processes and macro-outcomes and their relationship. Lynn et al. (2009) and Shaw (2015) (mentioned above) are both works in this spirit, as is the work of Watts and Dodds (2011). For an overview of analytical sociology, see Bearman and Hedström (2011).

Critical realism This approach is often positioned as a *via media* between positivism and social construction (Gorski 2013, 2018). Critical realism traces its lineage back to the work of Roy Bhaskar, Margaret Archer, and others, and introduces a number of conceptual tools to get around the difficulties of social construction. These include a multi-level, anti-reductionist understanding of reality; emergence; processual as opposed to event-based causation; and others. For a general introduction see Gorski (2013) and Porpora (2015).

Pragmatist sociology From William James to John Dewey through George Herbert Mead and the rest of the Chicago school, pragmatism has a long history in sociology. The latest programmatic volume by Gross, Reed, and Winship (2022) contains chapters that address traditional topics like action theory, agency, and problem-solving, but go beyond this to address questions of perception, aesthetics, and truth in sociology. Chang (2022) offers a more pointed explication of truth and reality on pragmatist terms. Martin (2015) contrasts pragmatist truth as an improvement over both social construction and critical realism.

Social ontology While not an alternative to social construction per say, the last alternative here is for sociologists to engage with the philosophy of social science directly. Social ontology is the branch of metaphysics that inquires about the nature of the social world, and has been particularly active over the past 15 years. The International Social Ontology Society hosts an annual international conference and founded the *Journal of Social Ontology* in 2015. Pioneers in this project include Gilbert's *On Social Facts* (1989), and Searle's *Construction of Social Reality* (1997) which set out to clarify the nature of social things and how they come to be. For notable recent works, see Haslanger (2012), Epstein (2015, 2025), and Little (2016).

6 Limitations

The data presented here offers compelling evidence for the decline of social constructionist language in most published sociological work. Alas, it's worth reiterating that this sample is constrained to those journals available in JSTOR's full-text repository. Journals outside this sample, like *Social Problems*, *Symbolic Interaction*, *Qualitative Sociology*, or journals in the sociology of culture or criminology might add nuance to the general trends documented here and the disciplinary narrative sketched above. Future research should explore ways to access this type of data. Additionally, taking example from Knoblauch and Wilke (2016), future work may extend this analysis beyond sociology to address cross-discipline prevalence.

Furthermore, it is important to note that sociology as a discipline is more than its publication record, book reviews are not the same as the books themselves, and the sociology classroom is more than the content of articles published in *Teaching Sociology*. Nonetheless, the availability of this kind of large-scale text data offers a unique opportunity to assess the history of our discipline.

7 Conclusion

Are sociologists still using the phrase "social construction"? Not really. At least not in most of the articles and book reviews analyzed here. I examine roughly 350 million words published in 115,000 articles across nineteen journals over 130 years. I demonstrate the rise of social construction in the late-1960s, its peak around 2000, and the decline of the last fifteen years. The social constructionist tradition traces its genealogy from the key ideas of Immanuel Kant, as interpreted by Durkheim, who influenced later thinkers like Saussure. Berger and Luckmann disseminated the idea to mainstream sociology, which generated stimulating work in social psychology, criminology, and social problems. Of course, the most basic claim of social construction — that the collective action of people can create new events, environments, and entities that can be experienced — is a true and important insight. Indeed, it is the reason social science exists at all. However, in its weak form this idea lacks explanatory leverage (*who* is doing the construction of *what*? *how*? *why*?), and in its strong form this idea collapses important distinctions between reality and knowledge, concepts and language.

I argue that these shortcomings led (or should lead) professional sociologists to abandon the term, if not necessarily the core insight, in favor of more precise intellectual programs. Of these, recent work in analytical sociology, critical realism, pragmatist soci-

ology, and social ontology offer fruitful alternatives to social scientists wanting to study what is true, what is real, and the role of human action in determining either.

Appendix 1: Data Source and Preparation

STUDY 1

I collected the data for study 1 in early 2025 from Constellate[1], and includes *American Journal of Sociology* (founded 1895), *Social Forces* (1925), and the *American Sociological Review* (1936). This data came in a nested structure. For each journal, one file contained metadata and the other two contained unigrams (word-frequencies) and bigrams (word-pair frequencies). In the metadata files, I removed all entries with less than 500 words and as many non-research entries as possible, including the masthead, book reviews, and acknowledgements. Some of these were already identified in the "docSubType" variable of the metadata file, but others had to be manually identified and removed using regular expressions. Because Constellate draws from multiple sources (JSTOR, Portico, Project MUSE), I also found more than 3,000 duplicate rows that had to be removed. In the unigram files, I removed all punctuation and numbers and converted to lowercase. Because the original word frequency counts were case-sensitive, I collapsed these counts after converting to lowercase. I also removed stopwords using the "iso" dictionary (Benoit, Muhr, and Watanabe 2021) and any string less than three characters. In the bigram files, I removed all punctuation and numbers and converted to lowercase. I removed any string less than seven characters and retained the stop words. The final dataset contains 16791 articles, 21 million words, and 73 million word-pairs. Table 1 in the text above provides descriptive summaries.

[1] `https://www.constellate.org`

STUDY 2

I collected the data for study 2 in early 2026 from JSTOR's Text Analysis Support[1] — the successor to Constellate. Unlike Constellate, which provided a user interface to create and download custom datasets, JSTOR's Text Analysis Support required a multi-step procedure. First, users are requires to download a single JSON file with metadata for all 12.5 million records on JSTOR. This file is larger than most personal computers can hold in memory, so to read into R I used the `jsonlite` package (Ooms 2014) to stream the file and convert to an R-compatible data frame. From here, I extracted all records coded "sociology" under the "discipline name" variable (N = 429,979) and used the "content type" variable to extract only "articles". I requested the full text for 79 of the 177 journals for further examination, mostly excluding journals in non-English languages or of irrelevant substantive content. This request (N = 175,067) was submitted for JSTOR staff approval[2].

After merging this full-text dataset with its metadata, I excluded all journals with fewer than 1000 records, with two exceptions. I included *Race, Gender, & Class* (N = 901) to capture substantive research on race, gender, and class, and I included the *Annual Review of Sociology* (N = 961) as a generalist review of the discipline. The final sample included these two journals and 16 other journals based on their longevity, substantive focus, and prominence in the discipline. Table 2 in the text above provides descriptive summaries.

Of these, four journals changed titles in their publication history and were merged with the most recent journal title. *The Journal of Educational Sociology* (est. 1927) became *Sociology of Education* in 1963. *Sociometry* (est. 1937) became *Social Psychology* in 1978, which became *Social Psychology Quarterly* in 1979. *Social Science* (est. 1925) ran until 1981 and was renamed the *International Social Science Review* in 1985. Lastly, *Race, Sex, & Class* (est. 1993) became *Race, Gender, & Class* in 1995.

This full text was converted to lowercase and line splits, punctuation, numbers, and extra whitespace were removed. Duplicate records or database errors were fixed or excluded. For example, some entries were titled "Book Reviews" but were labeled as "research articles" and I recoded these. Furthermore, at the time of this writing, JSTOR has an incorrect PDF attached to most book reviews of the *American Journal of Sociology* in the late 1990s (i.e. *AJS* 130.4 in 1998). This artificially inflated my argument of social

[1] `https://support.jstor.org/hc/en-us/articles/32479181127575-JSTOR-Text-Analysis-Support-Getting-Started`

[2] Request ID: 62c9620f-63a6-4547-a4a6-685fd5286e4a. Created: 12/18/2025, 2:54 PM.

construction's peak in 1999, but the trend remained once the duplicate or incorrect rows (N = 1024) were removed.

Appendix 2: Citation check

To confirm that these trends did not just represent the citations of Berger and Luckmann's 1966 volume, I conducted an analysis of mentions of "Berger and/& Luckmann" in the full-text variable to capture in-text citations, and "Social Construction of Reality" in the references variable to capture inclusion of their 1966 book in work-cited lists. This data organization was inconsistent across journals (some included references in the full-text, others separated into full-text and references list), but testing for both in-text and work-cited references ensured my results were not an artifact of citation behavior. Figure 7 presents descriptive trends of these results, with a dotted line at 1966. This analysis confirms that the prevalence of social constructionist language — while starting after the release of the book — is independent of formal citations of their work. Future work should examine this in more detail using formal citation databases. For example, see Knoblauch and Wilke (2016).

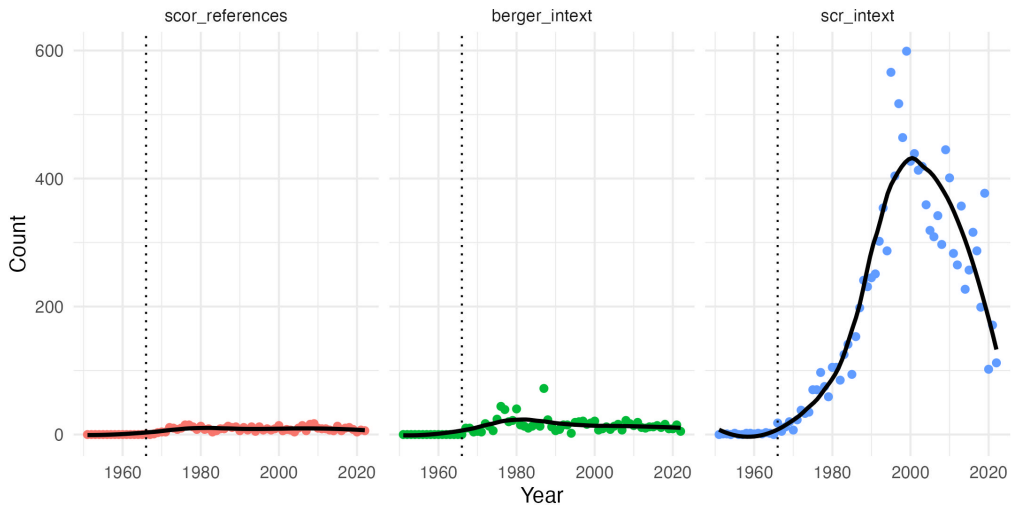

Figure 7: Comparing citation patterns with SCR word-search results

Accompanying materials, including coding scripts for Study 1 and Study 2 can be found here: `https://github.com/johnabernau/social-construction-review`

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