The critical claim of social constructionism is that social and psychological reality is an intellectual construction according to the linguistic conventions of a culturally and historically specific form of life: “Social constructionism views discourse about the world not as a reflection or a map of the world but as an artifact of communal interchange” (Gergen, 1985, p. 266). Two radical consequences are held to more or less immediately follow from this. The first is that there can be no objectivity with respect to individual or collective representations of social reality, since there is no independent reality that serves as the putative object of such representations. The same physical behaviors can be constructed as diverse actions or practices according to the different definitions of different individuals or social groups. The police officer or police community may construct the officer’s behavior as an arrest. The black youth and the black community may construct the officer’s behavior as harassment. Analogously, different historical periods and cultures may construct different ontologies of the social world. A behavior such as homosexuality may be sacrilegious in some medieval communities but a normal human relationship in ancient Greek and some contemporary societies, and a mark of divinity in some Indian tribes. The second consequence is that there can be no objectivity with respect to causal explanations of actions and practices, since socially constructed actions and practices may not be reidentifiable cross-culturally and tranhistorically.

The fact that theoretical concepts of reality are not “reflections” of reality—their meaning is not abstracted from the phenomena they are introduced to explain—does not entail that they cannot provide accurate (and inaccurate) representations of that reality which can be empirically evaluated. However, there is a more fundamental objection to social constructionism. If human actions and social practices are socially constructed in the sense proposed by social constructionist theorists, then it must be the case that our classifications of human actions and practices are sufficient conditions for their existence (Hamlyn, 1982).

But this is plainly not the case. It is patently not a sufficient condition of a
trial by jury, employment interview, or communion service that the participating agents or nonparticipant observers represent activities as instances of trial by jury, employment interview, or religious communion. Without the constitutive social relations of a trial by jury, employment interview, or religious community, no activity would count as a trial by jury, employment interview, or religious communion. Men and women do not become slaves or servants just by representing them as such. Slavery and servitude are essentially constituted by social relations of dominance and exploitation. Although social relations are the outcome of purposeful human actions (as well as an enabling condition for them [Bhaskar, 1979]), they are not constituted by the purposes that motivate them. Cooperation may be the product of entirely selfish individual motives. The actions of communist states and committees enforcing reverse discrimination may promote social inequality rather than social equality. Although there is a sense in which some human actions and practices are intellectual *creations*, it is never the case that individual actions or social practices are even partially constituted by individual or collective representations of them. In order to demonstrate this, we must first determine the various respects in which human actions and social practices may be said to be *socially constituted*.

**The Social Constitution of Action**

Most human actions and social practices are socially constituted insofar as they are partially constituted by social relational dimensions. An employment interview is partially constituted by its relational location within an organization. Most human actions and social practices are also partially constituted by representational dimensions. Acts of aggression and dishonor are partially constituted by the representations of individual agents and social collectives. Without these social relational and representational dimensions, there would be no human actions or social practices: human behavior would have no meaning or significance. These are conceptual facts about human actions and social practices that are on a logical par with the conceptual fact that physical reality has physical dimensions (shape, solidity, etc.).

It is also true that actions and practices are socially constituted in the sense that the agent and collective representations that are partially constitutive of human actions are *social representations*. That is, they are shared representations that are socially learned and negotiated by participants in a form of social life. In this respect, the representational dimensions of human actions and practices are also social dimensions. It is also true, although this point must be carefully distinguished, that the descriptive and theoretical representations employed by social agents in their classification of actions and practices are also social in nature in precisely the same respect. They are socially learned and negotiated by participants in a form of social life.