AN INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM

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Abstract

The social constructionism perspective says that we never know what universal true or false is, what is good or bad, right or wrong; we know only stories about true, false, good, bad, right or wrong. The social constructionism abandons the idea of constructivist that individual's mind represents a mirror of reality. The constructionism is focused on relations and sustains the individual's role in social construction of realities. „Maps for the same territory" seems to be the essence of constructivist. The social constructionism is not interested to create maps; it surprises the processes that maps form. Our maps are formed from our experience and how we perceive them. All our maps are differing maps of the same world. Each of us creates our own worlds from our perceptions of the actual world. The social constructionism sees the language, the communication and the speech as having the central role of the interactive process through which we understand the world and ourselves.

Keywords: social reality, constructionism, constructivist, epistemology.

What is Social Constructionism?

Social Constructionism or the social construction of reality is a theory of knowledge of sociology and communication that examines the development jointly constructed understanding of the world. Social constructionism may be defined as a perspective which believes that a great deal of human life exists as it does due to social and interpersonal influences (Gergen, 1985, p. 265). Although genetically inherited factors and social factors are at work at the same time, social constructionism does not deny the influence of genetic inheritance, but decides to concentrate on investigating the social influences on communal and individual life. The subjects that social constructionism is interested in are those to do with what anthropologists call culture, and sociologists call society: the shared social

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aspects of all that is psychological. There are several versions of social constructionism with different writers making different emphases. Two distin-guishing marks of social constructionism include the rejection of assumptions about the nature of mind and theories of causality, and placing an emphasis on the complexity and interrelatedness of the many facets of individuals within their communities. Causality may exist within specific cultures but much work needs to be done before these connections can be described with any certainty (Owen, 1995, p.15). Social constructionism involves challenging most of our common-sense knowledge of ourselves and the world we live in. This means that it does not just offer a new analysis of topics such as 'personality' or 'attitudes' which can simply be slotted into our existing framework of understanding. The framework itself has to change, and with it our understanding of every aspect of social and psychological life (Burr, 1995, p. 12).

Social constructionism is closely related to social constructionism in the sense that people are working together to construct artifacts. However, there is an important difference: social constructionism focuses on the artifacts that are created through the social interactions of a group, while social constructionism focuses on an individual's learning that takes place because of their interactions in a group. According to constructionism, particular radical constructionism, the child functions in relation to its environment, constructing, modifying and inter-preting the information s/he encounters in his/her relationship with the world (von Glaserfeld, 1995, p. 5). The individual's capacity to construct his/her own understanding of the world is connected with thinking and with the fact that the individual is able to construct. The constructionism is a semiotic paradigm which begins from the interpretative axiom according to the map through the reality is read, is nothing but a continuous negotiation. Any type of speech is interpreted as a social construction reality from a cultural consensus. The meanings of the concepts under them are taken from scientific language in cultural discourse, is a paradigmatic model, relatively independent of the scientific comes from. The cultural derivation of the meaning underlines the semantic convergence of any socio-cultural paradigms. In the mental plan produces the most profound re-organization, by passing from the understanding of the objective world to the model of a plurality of worlds whose indeterminacy is theoretically (Sandu, Ponea, 2011; Cojocaru, Bragaru, & Ciuchi, 2012). As an author sustains the construc-tionism abandons the idea according that the individual's mind represent the mirror of reality. The constructionism is based on relations and sustains the role of individual in the social construction of realities (Cojocaru, 2005; Cojocaru, 2013). According to McLeod (1997), there are several features of social constructionism. First, social constructionists reject the traditional positivistic approaches to know-ledge that are basically no reflexive in nature. Second, social constructionists take a critical stance in relation to taken-for-granted assumptions about the social world, which are seen as reinforcing the interests of dominant social groups. Third, social constructionists uphold the belief that the way we understand the world is a product of a historical process of interaction and negotiation between groups of people. Fourth, social constructionists maintain that the goal of research and scholarship is not to produce knowledge that is fixed and universally valid, but to open up an appreciation of what is possible. Finally, social constructionism

represents a movement toward redefining psychological constructs such as the "mind," "self," and "emotion" as social constructed processes that are not intrinsic to the individual but produced by social discourse. An integration of the existing literature on social constructionism (e.g., Gergen & Davis, 1985; McNamee & Gergen, 1992) shows that there are several cardinal principles emphasized in social constructionism. These include: realities are socially constructed; realities are constituted through language; knowledge is sustained by social processes; and reflexivity in human beings is emphasized. Society is viewed as existing both as a subjective and objective reality. Social constructionism focuses on meaning and power. Meaning is not a property of the objects and events themselves, but a construction. Meaning is the product of the prevailing cultural frame of social, linguistic, discursive and symbolic practices (Cojocaru, & Bragaru, 2012). Persons and groups interacting together in a social system form, over time, concepts or mental representations of each other's actions. These concepts eventually become habituated into reciprocal roles played by the actors in relation to each other. The roles are made available to other member of society to enter into and play out, the reciprocal interactions are said to be institutionalized (Cojocaru, 2010). In this process of this institutionalization meaning is embedded in society. Knowledge and people's conception (and belief) of what reality is become embedded in the institutional fabric of society (Berger and Luckman, 1996 pp. 75-77). Social constructionism can be described as part of the movement in postmodernism in that it attempts to "replace the objectivist ideal with a broad tradition of ongoing criticism in which all productions of the human mind are concerned" (Hoffman, 1991, p. 1) and is inextricably linked to postmodernism as a set of lenses that enforces an awareness of the way in which we perceive and experience the world. In essence, social constructionism is the claim and viewpoint that the content of our consciousness, and the mode of relating we have to other, is taught by our culture and society; all the metaphysical quantities we take for granted are learned from others around us (Owen, 1995, p. 186). From a social constructionist perspective, language is more than just a way of connecting people. People 'exist' in language. Consequently the focus is not on the individual person but rather on the social interaction, in which language is generated, sustained, and abandoned (Gergen & Gergen, 1991). Furthermore, Berger and Luckman (cited in Speed, 1991, p. 400) state that people socially construct reality by their use of agreed and shared meaning communicated through language. Thus, our beliefs about the world are social inventions. Anderson and Goolishian (1988) concur that from the social constructionist perspective there are no 'real' external entities that can be accurately mapped or apprehended. We are thereby forced to resign our cherished position as 'knowers' and our assumptions that there are 'facts' that we can come to know. These 'facts', along with other ideas and assumptions, are social constructions, artifact of socially mediated discourse. However, this does not mean that anything goes (Gergen, 1985). Knowledge and systems are inherently dependent upon communities of shared intelligibility and vice versa. They are, therefore, governed to a large degree by normative rules that are historically and culturally situated. As a result, social constructionists do not claim to provide the 'truth'. Gergen (1999) claims that in numerous instances, the criteria, which are invoked to identify 'behaviours', 'events' or 'entities', are largely circumscribed

by culture, history and social context. Therefore, a social constructionist per-spective, as opposed to a constructivist perspective, "locates meaning in an understanding of how ideas and attitudes are developed over time within a social, community context" (Dickerson & Zimmerman, 1996, p. 80). Hoffman (1991, p. 5) states that all knowledge evolves in the space between people, in the realm of the 'common world' or the 'common dance'. Only through the on-going con-versation with intimates does the individual develop a sense of identity or an inner voice. Anderson and Goolishian (cited in Hart, 1995, p. 184), add that "we live with each other in a world of conversational narrative, and we understand ourselves and each other through changing stories and self descriptions".

Social constructionism regards individuals as integral with cultural, political and historical evolution, in specific times and places, and so resituates psycho-logical processes cross-culturally, in social and temporal contexts. Apart from the inherited and developmental aspects of humanity, social constructionism hypo-thesizes that all other aspects of humanity are created, maintained and destroyed in our interactions with others through time. The social practices of all life begin, are recreated in the present and eventually end. For psychotherapy, this view emphasizes the importance of the acquisition, creation and change of emotional behavior, therapeutic ability and ways of interpreting things and people. Because the genetic material of each race and region is different, as well as the cultural practice, then we say right from the start that there is no universal human nature. What social constructionism shows to be important are the ways in which so-cialization and enculturation, amongst the people we have known, plus the current influence of those whom we now know, are the most active in shaping our mutual existence with others (Owen, 1995, p. 161). Social constructionism argues that true objectivity is absent in the human sciences because all methods require one set of subjective humans to rate another set of subjective humans. So, "the tool for knowing" is inevitably subjective people themselves. As regards the community of human scientists, until a truth-claim is acceptably demonstrated to be a uni-versal or local truth, then it must be held separate and used only with caution. However, many human scientists throw caution to the wind and put their belief and life force into provisional claims which are not shared by the whole commu-nity of workers.

Social construction talk is all the rage. But what does it mean and what is its point? The core idea seems clear enough. „To say of something that it is socially constructed is to emphasize its dependence on contingent aspects of our social selves. It is to say: This thing could not have existed had we not built it; and we need not have built it at all, at least not in its present form. Had we been a different kind of society, had we had different needs, values, or interests, we might well have built a different kind of thing, or built this one differently" (Boghossian, 2001). The inevitable contrast is with a naturally existing object, something that exists independently of us and which we did not have a hand in shaping. There are certainly many things, and facts about them, that are socially constructed in the sense specified by this core idea: money, citizenship and newspapers, for example. None of these things could have existed without society; and each of them could have been constructed differently had we so chosen (Boghossian, 2001). As Ian

Hacking rightly observes, however, in his recent monograph, *The Social Construction of What?* (1999), social construction talk is often applied not only to worldly items – things, kinds and facts – but to our *beliefs* about them. Consider Helene Moussa's *The Social Construction of Women Refugees* (1992). „Clearly, the intent is not to insist on the obvious fact that certain women come to be refugees as a consequence of social events. Rather, the idea is to expose the way in which a particular *belief* has been shaped by social forces: the belief that there is a particular kind of person – he woman refugee – deserving of being singled out for special attention" (Boghossian, 2001, p.6).

Varieties of Constructionism

What is social constructionism? Sometimes called a movement, at other times a position, a theory, a theoretical orientation, an approach; psychologists remain unsure of its status. At its most general it serves as a label denoting a series of positions that have come to be articulated after the publication of Berger and Luckmann's influential work in 1966 but that have been influenced, modified and refined by other intellectual movements such as ethno methodology, social studies of science, feminism, post structuralism, narrative philosophy and psychology, post-foundational philosophy and post-positivist philosophy of science, and more (see Burr, 1995). That there is no single social constructionist position is now more obvious than ever, and that positions that have never labeled or identified themselves as social constructionism are sometimes labeled in this way simply adds to the confusion. Like the term 'postmodernism', social constructionism is not a single target (for its critics) or a single movement (for its enthusiasts) (Henderikus, 2001, p. 294). The frequent conflation of postmodernism with social constructionism adds to the confusion, since the former is even more ambiguous a label, not to mention that in many respects social constructionism is thoroughly and respectably modernist in intent and practice. Of course, having said all this, it is not out of the question that a list could be drawn up with appropriate similarities and some key set of defining features found that many could agree do function as central to the enterprise called 'social constructionism'. But this is beside the point. What counts as constructionism is often dependent on the author's or critic's aims. For what seems important to many of our authors is to critique a particular version, namely that associated with Ken Gergen. One of the more interesting phenomena has been the reluctance among some of our authors to tackle more than what was represented by Gergen's writings. This is fair enough insofar as an author may choose whatever target is deemed crucial to the author's purposes. Nonetheless, the focus on a single position sometimes lapses into a version of a historicism, ignoring the rich traditions that have led the social sciences to choose something like 'social constructionism' at the start of the 21st century. For what is at play here are not just competing claims for intellectual priorities and changes, shifting academic fashions and the repudiation of the scientism that reigned so long in the form of positivism: the emergence of social constructionism also coincides with the coming of age of a generation of scholars whose academic tutelage was colored by political activism and the rapid growth

of post-war universities, followed by their recent and equally dramatic restructuring as branch plants of the corporate world (Henderikus, 2001, p. 295).

History and development

Social constructionism has many roots - some are in existential-phenomenological psychology, social history, hermeneutics and social psychology (Watzlawick 1984). Several of its major themes have occurred in the writings of authors at different times and places. Giambattista Vico, Immanuel Kant and Karl Marx have all made constructionist and constructivist remarks. The disciplines of the history of ideas and the sociology of knowledge also have much in common with social constructionism. In Britain, two leading social constructionists are Rom Harre at the University of Oxford and Michael Billig and his team at Loughborough University. Michael Billig's *Arguing and Thinking* (1987) concludes that attitudes are features of rhetoric. Rom Harre has written on the social construction of personality and emotional behavior which has touched on some of the more important implications for the theory and practice of therapy (1984). Harre has also produced a series of works on the body, individuality, social life and motivation. Harre takes the work of Bakhurst on the Russian cultural-historical school of Vygotsky, Leontiev, Luria, Voloshinov, Bakhtin and Ilyenkov, as being particularly social constructionist. For instance, Bakhurst describes a view of mind that regards the capacity to think as the ability to live in a meaningful world (Bakhurst, 1991). These views challenge the orthodoxy of current individualistic psychology and the assumptions which it holds dear. Social constructionism wonders to what degree people are individual and collective, the same as others or different from them. Just because we can each say "I" and have separate bodies does not mean that thoughts and emotions are located solely within individuals. Rather, these exist between individuals. Humans are part of shared collective aims, values and experiences.

A recent influence within social constructionism is to investigate the ways in which events, processes and qualities are presented and modeled in language, the discursive, which could be called linguistic analysis, as it concentrates on how descriptions of what is real are made, passed on and change through time (Edwards & Potter 1992, Grace 1987). The role language plays in memory has also been tackled. But the study of appropriate language games does not reflect the interrelation of the non-verbal relationships of humanity in connection with the possible ways of verbalizing them. The currently acceptable ways of talking about the mind show the linguistic representation of ontological assumptions about the nature of the mind. For instance, the mind in itself does not exist and never has or ever will. The mind, like any other concept, is created by talk from professionals and lay people as to what the mind is. The mind, as it is usually assumed to be is the receptacle for "individuality" and "thoughts". "Individuality" is a Western assumption that people are separate and unique and fully self-responsible in all aspects of their life, from catching a cold, to having children who become delinquents, or their career going into decline (Owen, 1995, p. 164).

Social constructionism as it is now infiltrating British and North American psychology and social psychology cannot be traced to a single source. It has emerged from the combined influences of a number of North American, British and continental writers dating back more than thirty years. I shall give here what may be considered an outline of its history and major influences, bearing in mind that his history itself is only one possible constructions of the events (Burr, 1995, p. 6). Many of the fundamental assumptions of social constructionism have been alive and well living in sociology for guide some time. Sixty years ago Mead (1934), writing in USA, founded 'symbolic interactionism' with his book Mind, self and society. Fundamental to symbolic interactionism is the view that as people we construct our own and each other's identities through our everyday encounters with each other in social interaction. In line with this way of thinking, the sub discipline of etnometodology, this grew up in North America in the 1950s and 1960s, tried to understand the processes by which ordinary people construct social life and make sense of it to themselves and each other. But the major social constructionist contribution from sociology is usually taken to be Berger and Luckmann's (1996) book *The Social Construction of Reality*. Berger and Luck-mann's anti-essentialist account of social life argues that human beings together create and sustain all social phenomena through social practices. They see three fundamental processes as responsible for this: externalization, objectivation and internalization. People externalise when they act on their world, creating some artifact or practice. For example, they may have an idea (such as the idea that the sun revolves around the earth) and externalise it by telling a story or writing a book. But this then enters into the social realm; other people re-tell the story or read the book, and once in this social realm the story or books begin to take on a life of its own. The idea is expresses has become an object of consciousness for people in that society (objectivation) and has developed a kind of factual existence of truth; it seems to be out there, an objective feature of the world which appears as natural, issuing from the nature of the world itself rather than dependent upon the constructive work and interactions of human beings. Finally, because future generations are born into a world where this idea already exists, they internalize is as part of their consciousness, as part of their understanding of the nature of the world. Berger and Luckmann's account shows how the world can be socially constructed by the social practices of people, but at the same time by experienced by them as if the nature of their world is pre-given and fixed. We could say that social constructionism itself has now achieved the status of an object. "In writing this book and ostensibly describing it I am contributing to its objectivation in the world. And in the future, students who will read this ad other books about social constructionism will tend to think of it as an area of knowledge that has been discovered rather as an effect to social processes. In writing this book, then I am contributing to what might be called "the social construction of social con-structionism" (Burr, 1995, p. 7).

A Postmodern Approach to Knowledge

Social constructionism can be seen as a source of the postmodern movement, and has been influential in the field of cultural studies. Some have gone so far as to attribute the rise of cultural studies (the cultural turn) to social constructionism. Within the social constructionist strand of postmodernism, the concept of socially constructed reality stresses the ongoing mass-building of world views by individuals in dialectical interaction with society at a time. The numerous realities so formed comprise, according to this view, the imagined worlds of human social existence and activity, gradually crystallized by habit into institutions propped up by language conventions, given ongoing legitimacy by mythology, religion and philosophy, maintained by therapies and socialization, and subjectively internalized by upbringing and education to become part of the identity of social citizens. In the book *"The Reality of Social Construction"* the British sociologist Dave Elder-Vass (2012) places the development of social constructionism as one outcome of the legacy of postmodernism. He writes "Perhaps the most widespread and influential product of this process [coming to terms with the legacy of postmodernism] is social constructionism, which has been booming [within the domain of social theory] since the 1980s'" (Elder-Vass, 2012, p. 12).

Social constructionism is a theoretical movement that brings an alternative philosophical assumption regarding reality construction and knowledge production. It is concerned with the ways in which knowledge is historically situated and embedded in cultural values and practices. According to this approach, meanings are socially constructed via the coordination of people in their various encounters; therefore, it is always fluid and dynamic (Gergen & Gergen, 2012). In the last few decades, social constructionism has been presented and embraced in different areas of knowledge in the international literature. As a field of interest about the constructed nature of reality, it has been influenced by different psychological, philosophical, and social perspectives, such as the analytical philosophy, the sociology of the knowledge, and the rhetoric (Gergen, 1994). Centering on the process of the social construction of reality, social constructionist perspectives have been used to support a variety of practices in the fields of education, health care, community work, conflict resolution, and organizations. Although it cannot be translated into a clear-cut set of guidelines, given the nature of its epistemological proposal, it has enriched a vari-ety of research and professional practices from different fields of knowledge with a generative vocabulary, allowing innovative practices to emerge (Gergen & Gergen, 2012). Some of these practices include a focus on strengths and what is already working well instead of on problems and how to fix them, an emphasis on a diversity of perspectives instead of on commonalities of ideas, transdisciplinary teams, decentralized decision making, and increased flexibil-ity in terms of approaches and policies, all of which are informed, in turn, by an appreciation for a multicultural and polyphonic environment. Having a postmodern intelligibility, social constructionism invites a review of some modern assumptions about knowledge production, such as (a) individual rationality, (b) empirical evaluation, (c) language as representation, and (d) the narrative of progress (McNamee & Hosking, 2012). In a constructionist perspective, individual rationality is not conceived of as an attribute of individual

thinking but as a consequence of cultural convention. It is through the coordinated actions with each other that the meaning of rationality is eventually reached. This constructionist statement invites other forms of evaluating knowledge production, which goes beyond a focus on individual rationality, and moves to relationality and creativity with the ability to generate involvement and to promote change. In the same way, the empirical method is not understood as conveying the correct knowledge about reality, but as being a phenomenon defined and studied by a specific theory and its methods. The results of the systematic observation of reality are a priori circumscribed by the theory used. The constructionist invitation is to comprehend how aspects of the world that are taken for granted are socially constructed, thereby opening up space for a variety of alternative intelligibilities. Methodologically, the challenge is not to prove and persuade the other about the correct interpretation of the phenomenon, but to broaden the possibilities of understanding. This fluid and dynamic approach has helped to foster communication, dialogue, and integration of perspectives.

Language, a fundamental aspect for the process of knowledge production, is not conceived of as describing and representing the world, but as a way of constructing it, being a form of social action. Language gains its meaning from its use in context (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 1994; McNamee, 2004). The constructionist approach emphasizes the ability to create realities through language, in its varied forms of presenta-tion, stimulating a process of continuous creation.

Considering the critique of individual rationality, empir-ical evaluation, and the representational view of language, there is a questioning of the narrative of progress in science. Historical analysis of the recent developments of scientific knowledge shows that it does not have a linear and cumulative nature that neither has making achieved the control of nature yet, as it was intended by the modern researchers, or science has led society to a life free of suffering. This analysis helps to prevent the naive acceptance of scientific authoritative claims and me-thods, and it also invites us to take scientific knowledge as an intelligibility that may guide our actions depending on its contextual value. The constructionist review of modern assumptions has important consequences for knowledge pro-duction in the organizational field. First, it favors processes of deconstruction by stimulating a reflexive stance in the production of the knowledge that allows a critique of traditional practices in the society and its cultural implications. Second, it promotes theoretical and practical reconstructions through generative theories (Gergen, 1978) that can contribute to social transformation and promote the approach between institutions as well as academia. Also, it invites openness to alternative ways of producing and presenting knowledge, which goes beyond traditional scientific texts, moving toward lively expressions of language that capture the imagination of people (Watkins, Mohr, & Kelly, 2011). There is room for narratives, social poetics, images, and videos in knowledge production and expression. Knowledge, in this approach, is meant to offer new intelligibilities and creatively construct new realities. Finally, it emphasizes the contextual value of knowledge production and its practices, strengthening the liasion between research and intervention, claiming the need of involvement and collaboration of those who will use the knowledge in its production. It creates the scenario for an

enhanced sense of democratization, which sustains the primacy of utility, parti-cipation, and social transformation in the assessment and use of knowledge, rather than an adequate representation of reality.

The constructionist theory is very sensitive to changes generating new forms of practices and behaviors. In times of rapid transformation in the world, social constructionism can be a useful approach to address and embrace changes in context, pointing to new possibilities of doing research and intervention. Besides this, the option for the constructionist alternative has ethical implications. It is a way of thinking and doing that moves away from expertise-based, rational, hierarchical, and result-focused models going toward more participatory, co-creative, and process-centered ones.

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