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http://www.apa.org/monitor/2011/06/social-change.aspx
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Social Constructionism

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Introduction

Emerging with the Western Enlightenment is a conception of knowledge as "justified true belief," in which the justification for an individual's belief is based on empirical evidence. The image of Galileo is iconic in this case; the single individual – informed by observation and engages in rational thought – successfully challenged the dogma of the church in proving that the earth rotated around the sun. In the twentieth century this empiricist view of knowledge came to be known as logical positivism and was – and continues to be – used as a foundational justification for certain practices of science. However, in the late twentieth century, several bodies of scholarship not only provided lethal

criticism of the empiricist view but provided the basis for a social epistemology. This view of knowledge, commonly known as social construction, embodies the central elements of these critiques.

Definition

Social construction is typically defined as an account of knowledge in which all assertions about what is the case are traced to negotiated agreements among people. Knowledge on this account is not driven by empirical fact, but what counts as fact depends on assumptions, logics, practices, and values specific to culturally and historically situated communities. Thus, observations support or disconfirm a theory, only if one accepts the a priori assumptions underlying the theory and methods of research. Social constructionism is often conflated with the term constructivism, although major contributors to constructivism frequently place the locus of knowledge within the mind of the individual person, while constructionists trace the origins of knowledgeable assertions within the social sphere.

Keywords

Social construction; logical positivism; constructivism; discourse; deconstruction; ideology; truth; objectivity

History

Although one may trace certain roots of social constructionism to Vico, Nietzsche, and Dewey, scholars often view Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* as the landmark volume. Yet, because of its lodgment in social phenomenology, this work has largely been eclipsed by more recent scholarly developments. These developments in social constructionist thought are located in three, relatively

independent movements: ideological critique, linguistic and literary theory, and the social constitution of science. As described in Gergen (1994), the convergence of these movements provides the basis for social constructionist inquiry today.

Ideological Critique

Central to the positivist/empiricist movement is the view that empirically grounded descriptions of the world carry no ideological biases. As proposed, properly supported scientific accounts of the world do not reflect the values, moral prescriptions, or religious beliefs of any particular group. This view met an early challenge from Marxist theorists, who argued that capitalist economic theory – despite all the research and analysis in its support – was essentially a mystifying means of fortifying the existing class structure. Or more broadly put, scientific descriptions are not mirrors of the world; based on one's particular interests, certain accounts are preferred over others. This logic subsequently became the basis for an enormous body of scholarship in which the taken-for-granted realities of various knowledge-making groups were found inimical to one or another social enclave (e.g., women, people of color, gays and lesbians, the working class, environmentalists, communalists, the colonized). Many critics have found their work galvanized by the writings of Michel Foucault (1978, 1980). In Foucault's terms, claims to knowledge function to build and sustain structures of power.

Linguistic and Literary Theory

A second major challenge to the empiricist account of knowledge emerged from linguistic and literary theory. The empiricist concepts of accuracy, objectivity, and truth all depend on the assumption that certain words correspond to what is the case. On this view, certain utterances are truth bearing, while others are exaggerated or untrue. Linguistic theory, however, argues that the relationship between a word and its referent is fundamentally arbitrary. Thus, in principle, any utterance could be used to represent any state of affairs. What privileges any particular arrangement of words as being "true" is simply social convention.

Equally significant, literary theorists began to demonstrate that language functions as a system in itself. If language use is determined by a logic of its own, then reports on the nature of the world will necessarily be driven by this logic. This line of thinking subsequently has led to substantial scholarly study of the ways in which scientific accounts are governed by linguistic devices such as metaphor and narrative. In the latter case, for example, evolutionary theory is only intelligible by virtue of its drawing from narrative traditions of storytelling (Landau, 1993). Such work has been further innervated by the works of Jacques Derrida (1976) and particularly his writings on linguistic deconstruction. As Derrida proposed, language meaning depends on a system of differences or binaries. That is, the meaning of a word depends on a simple split between "the word" and "not the word." Word meaning depends, then, on differentiating between a *presence* and an *absence*, which is designated by the word against what is not designated. To give an account of the world is thus to speak in terms of presences, what is designated, against a backdrop of absences. In effect, the presences are privileged; they are brought into focus by the words themselves; the absences are suppressed. Or in effect, truth is only intelligible if one suppresses its implicit negation.

Social Constitution of Science

These preceding critiques, emerging in separate scholarly traditions, begin to coalesce in the third and perhaps most essential contribution to social construction. The origins may be found in the sociology of knowledge, with Berger and Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* a formative influence. However, the landmark volume is Thomas Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Most importantly, this work represented a frontal challenge to the long-standing presumption that scientific knowledge is progressive and that with continued research – testing hypotheses against reality – we

come ever closer to the truth. Rather, proposed Kuhn, scientific propositions about the world are embedded within *paradigms*, roughly a network of shared commitments to a theory, conception of a subject matter, methodological practices, values, and the like. Thus, even the most exacting measurements are only sensible from within the paradigm. A look into a microscope tells you nothing unless you are already informed about the nature of the instrument and what you are supposed to be looking at. What we call progress in science is not then a movement from a less to a more objectively accurate paradigm. Rather it represents a shift in paradigm, a new way of thinking and observing.

In recent decades this social view of science has been buttressed by an enormous body of scholarship centered on the cultural and historical contingency of scientific knowledge. As broadly acknowledged, the philosophical search for foundations of empirical knowledge is now moribund. Rather, summarizing these three critical movements, it is more fruitful to understand scientific knowledge as a by-product of negotiated agreements among people concerning the nature of the world. Whatever exists makes no fundamental requirements regarding our attempts to describe and explain. But, once we have entered into a particular tradition of understanding, as represented in a shared language, this tradition will provide both direction and limits on our explanations, descriptions, and observations. Further, following Wittgenstein (1953), all such traditions will be wedded to particular ways of life, which is to say they will carry certain implicit or explicit values or desired goals.

This social constructionist conception of knowledge is not at all fatal to the empirical tradition. Rather, it simply removes the foundations for such a tradition, viewing it as one possibility among others. Thus, the primary questions to be asked of any knowledge-making community are first pragmatic and second valuational. What is the utility of various claims to knowledge, and for whom are the outcomes of such claims valuable or not? In this sense, social constructionism constitutes a critical pragmatism.

Traditional Debates

Although fully insinuated into many sectors of scholarship and practice, constructionist ideas remain highly controversial – if not avoided altogether – in mainstream, empiricist psychology. Psychologists are scarcely alone in their resistance, and indeed constructionist ideas are centrally implicated in what have come to be known as "the science wars" and the "culture wars." Polarization has resulted, in part, from the way in which constructionist-based critiques have often demonized their targets and in part because traditionalists fail to understand key constructionist arguments. Traditionalists typically view constructionist ideas as empirical truth claims, without realizing that constructionist ideas are themselves constructions. In this sense, constructionism approximates a non-foundational foundation.

Among the more pointed critiques of constructionism are its nihilism and its ontological relativism. In the first case, for traditionalists, the deconstructive critiques seem to discount all that science has contributed to the world. For them, constructionists seem to be saying "science is *just* a social construction," or, in effect, equivalent to fairy tales. And if just a set of stories, then why bother? In contrast, they argue, the fact that diseases have been cured and men have set foot on the moon seem obvious outcomes of solid science. Yet, repeating the earlier refrain, constructionist arguments are not antiscience. That science yields pragmatically valued outcomes does not, however, make its assumptions or theories true. Its outcomes are valuable for certain ends for certain people. Thus, constructionists open the door to multiple orientations to the world, to multiple offerings for multiple purposes. This is not nihilism, but an invitation to broad enrichment.

In terms of ontological relativism, traditionalists chide constructionists for what they see as an "anything goes" mentality, which is to say that all accounts of the world are equal. This is largely a straw man critique, wholly undocumented. What constructionists do propose is that there are many perspectives for understanding, and whatever criteria one might use to judge among

them will issue from one of these perspectives. Thus there is no ultimate measure for judging among perspectives. From an empiricist perspective, prediction may be a valued criterion; however, from other perspectives a high value might be placed on equal rights, ethics of sustainability, world peace, beauty, or spiritual well-being. In sum, constructionism invites a pluralist world.

Critical Debates

Although critical psychologists have made extensive use of the deconstructive logics so central to social constructionism, many have also turned critical attention to constructionism itself. Chief among these criticisms is the way in which constructionism removes the essential grounds for their critique of various inequities, such as gender, race, and class. Although the dominant discourse can be subverted with constructionist logics, these same logics then point to the constructed character of the "fight for justice." In turn, constructionists suggest that by lodging critique in foundations, the stage is set for recrimination and escalating antagonism. By recognizing the constructed character of all positions, new and more promising forms of dialogue may be envisioned.

Others within the critical movement embrace many constructionist views, but wish to hold on to one or more essentialisms. "Everything is constructed," for example, "except power," "the body," or "sense data." Constructionists reply that the revolutionary implications of constructionist ideas are undermined by such piecemeal salvaging attempts. And too, as a metatheory, constructionism does not reject such terms. All are valuable for some purposes. The primary questions, again, concern the ends achieved by the use of such discourse and the value implications of what follows.

International Relevance

Social constructionist ideas and practices are shared around the world, with translations and original contributions found in all major languages. There are many reasons for this rapid proliferation. In Third World nations there is a high degree of skepticism of the empiricist orientation, as it bears the marks of American imperialism. Constructionist ideas help to subvert the intrusion and offer a pluralist alternative. In cultures with a strong communal tradition – in Latin America, Asia, and Scandinavia – the constructionist emphasis on the collaborative creation of meaning is more congenial than Western individualism. And, for the indigenous psychology movement, constructionist ideas lend strong support. Rather than "one unified psychology," constructionists point to the benefit of multiple traditions. Finally, many see constructionist ideas as the key to global peace, as they remove all fundamentalisms (including science and constructionism itself), thus inviting more positive dialogues on future possibilities.

Practice Relevance

Constructionist ideas have found an enthusiastic audience in many fields of practice. In psychology this is especially so for developments in therapeutic practice, counseling, community psychology, education, and organizational behavior. For the most part, practice relevance stems from the constructionist emphasis on collaborative meaning making. Because all our beliefs and values rest on social tradition, it should be possible at any point in time to engage in collaborative and creative constructions of alternatives to these traditions. Thus, for example, in narrative therapy, clients are helped to "re-story" their lives in ways that are more functional and fulfilling. Other constructionist-oriented therapies shift the conversation from "the problem" to future building. Organizational behavior specialists set in motion dialogues that enable organizations to generate new and more inspiring conceptions of their future. Educational specialists have used constructionist ideas to develop collaborative and dialogic teaching practices. Constructionist ideas also inform a wide range of practices outside psychology. They are used, for example, in

such wide-ranging areas as health care, regional planning, mediation, and peace building.

Future Directions

Although constructionist logics have played a pivotal role in the critical movement, many see their function in this movement as limited in potential. Most important, many believe it is more important at this juncture to use constructionist ideas to build alternative futures. In other terms, the deconstructive or liberating phase of constructionist efforts is being replaced by a reconstructive phase. This phase is reflected in many of the activities discussed in the preceding section. However, these activities are also limited in potential as they so often limited to the grassroots level. Future efforts must increasingly be devoted to major decision making groups, in government, business, and religion. Constructionist-based movements to build a United Religions Organization and to organize businesses around practices of world benefit now lead the way.

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Social Distance

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Introduction

Within diverse societies, people from different groups experience connection and solidarity in some social situations and distance and alienation from members of different groups in other situations. The concept of social distance was developed to advance understanding of processes of acceptance and estrangement between groups of people in cities where people who belong to different groups come into regular contact with one another.

Definition

Social distance refers to the extent to which people experience a sense of familiarity (nearness and intimacy) or unfamiliarity (farness and difference) between themselves and people belonging to different social, ethnic, occupational, and religious groups from their own. Social distance is not a static cognitive attribute of acceptance. People can shift and change their sense of affinity or dissonance with particular groups across different contexts. Accordingly, it is more accurate to think of *social distancing* as a dynamic social practice played out in the mutable midst of *everyday life* (Hodgetts et al., 2011).