

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

The phrase *social construction* refers to a tradition of scholarship that traces the origin of knowledge, meaning, or understanding to human relationships. The term *constructivism* is sometimes used interchangeably, but scholarship associated with constructivism tends to trace the origin of people's constructions of the world to processes inherent in the individual mind, as opposed to human relationships. Although one may trace early roots of social construct to Vico, Nietzsche, and Dewey, scholars often view Berger and Luckmann's 1966 volume, *The Social Construction of Reality*, as the landmark work. Yet, because of its being lodged in social phenomenology, this work has largely been eclipsed by more recent scholarly developments. One may locate the primary stimulants to the more recent development of social constructionist thought in at least three quite independent movements. The convergence of these movements provides the basis for social constructionist inquiry today.

The first movement, which may be viewed as critical, refers to the mounting criticism of the unacknowledged ideological saturation of all descriptions and explanations of the world, including those issuing from the empirical sciences. Such criticism can be traced at least to the Frankfurt School, but today it is more fully embodied in the work of Foucault and associated movements within feminist, black, gay and lesbian, and antipsychiatry enclaves. The second significant movement, the literary/rhetorical, originates in the fields of literary theory and rhetorical study. In these domains, inquiry demonstrates the extent to which scientific theories, explanations, and descriptions of the world are not so much dependent on the world in itself as on discursive conventions. Traditions of language usage set the conditions within which all accounts of the world must be lodged. The third context of ferment, the social, may be traced to the collective scholarship in the history of science, the sociology of knowledge, and social studies of science. Here the major focus is on the social processes giving rise to knowledge claims, both scientific and otherwise. Summary reviews of these movements are provided by Gergen (1994) and Hacking (1999).

The social constructionist views favored by this composite of developments have begun to furnish a replacement for traditional empiricist accounts of psychological science. In the process of this replacement, one may distinguish between two phases of constructionist activity: deconstructionist and reconstructionist. In the former phase, pivotal assumptions of scientific rationality, along with bodies of empirically justified knowledge claims, have been placed in question. An extensive body of literature has emerged that challenges existing commitments to scientific progress, empirical hypothesis testing, universal rationality, laws of human functioning, the impartiality of science, and the exploration of Western scientific practices. Such work

essentially argues against the possibility of any logical foundations of knowledge.

Immersion in this literature alone might lead to the conclusion that social constructionism is nihilistic in its aims. However, this would be to misunderstand the constructionist proposals. Such proposals do not attempt to eliminate any orientation to knowledge but rather to locate all such orientations in culture and history—including its own. Within the reconstructive phase, the chief focus is on ways in which scientific inquiry and practice, informed by constructionist views, can more effectively serve the society of which it is a part. Such issues are at the forefront of contemporary discussion. When applied to the domain of psychological study, the constructionist orientation invites the following:

1. Pragmatic Utility

Constructionists are critical of traditional claims that psychological inquiry should be aimed at establishing transhistorical and transcultural knowledge. First, such claims do not take into account their constructed character of scientific knowledge and the consequent possibility of an infinite number of alternative accounts. Second, such claims lend themselves to Western imperialism, in which Western categories of understanding are presumed to be fundamental. Third, such claims seem blind to the continuous process of meaning making from which new patterns of behavior can emerge at any time. Thus, for the constructionist, the enormous array of empirical technologies are largely misused and serve primarily those who seek to sustain theories of little utility within a community of scientific peers.

In contrast, for the constructionist, the observational techniques, measuring devices, and statistical technologies can be effectively used to access current conditions (e.g., cultural well-being, contours of conflict, and homelessness) and the efficacy of various programs (e.g., community shelters, job training, and conservation), as well as to draw trend lines for deliberating the future (e.g., for planning day care needs, drug counseling facilities, and employment-retraining centers). Of course, the terms of such study are culturally constructed, but there is nothing about constructionism that demands the abandonment of intelligibilities (or ways of life) by virtue of recognizing their communally constituted character.

It is this ultimate concern with pragmatic utility that brings constructionist ideas into generative relationship with practitioners in psychology. Constructionist ideas have assisted many in the therapeutic domain to abandon the competition among schools in favor of viewing all therapy as a social process in which transformations in meaning are central. Specific practices of therapy emerging from

the dialogues on constructionism are narrative therapy, solution-oriented therapy, reflecting teams, and collaborative therapy (see Neimeyer & Mahoney, 1995). In the educational sphere, practitioners find it useful to shift their focus from the mind of the individual student to the relational processes in which learning occurs (Bruner, 1996), from a fixed curriculum to the potentials of continuous dialogue both within the class and between the class and the outside community, and from a singular concept of “the educated individual” to the possibility of multicultural forms of education. In the organizational sphere, constructionism sensitizes practitioners to shared meaning systems and their functions and conflicts within the organization (see Cooperrider & Whitney, 2000). Constructionist concerns with narrative, metaphor, ideology, and meaning making have played a central role in achieving organizational change.

2. Conceptual Innovation

From the empiricist standpoint, theory is essentially derived inductively from careful observation. For the constructionist, however, there can be no significant observation without an orienting perspective. In this sense, there are no findings in the research process; there are only makings. This view thrusts theoretical activity into a far more significant role than in the empiricist tradition. Scholars are invited into innovative theorizing without the necessity of accumulating a body of established research. Nor is it essential to view the function of theory as stimulating research. Although this may be one function, as psychological discourse gains intelligibility within the culture (through education, the media, the mental health professions, and the like), it becomes a usable resource within the sphere of daily relationships. Thus scholarly work in psychology—in the form of innovative theorizing—may have enormous potential for the society. As new theoretical lenses are made available, new options may open in problem domains of long standing. New ways of understanding conflict, of seeing the educational process, of appreciating group differences, and the like may become available as a cultural resource.

An illustration of theoretical innovation in these latter terms may be found in a substantial body of theory and illustrative research that challenges the Western tradition of individualism. Relevant to psychology in particular, the concern is with the presumption of independent minds and, indeed, with the dualist tradition that places mental functioning within the bodies of independent beings. Drawing from the early theorizing of Vygotsky and George Herbert Mead, along with contemporary inquiry in

discourse processes, the attempt is to reconceptualize mental functioning as social activity, or as a social activity carried out privately. On this account, thinking has been reconceptualized as rhetorical action, attitudes as positions in conversation, memory as a social achievement, and emotional action as a constituent of culturally specific scenarios of relationship (see Middleton & Brown, 2005).

3. Liberation and Critical Reflection

In the empiricist tradition, the primary criteria for critical assessment of scientific work are methodological. The chief question to be asked of a given formulation is whether it provides a valid account of the phenomenon. For the constructionist, however, the crucial question to be asked of a theoretical formulation is how it can or will function within the broader society. What institutions and actions does the theory sustain, what is challenged by the formulation, and what new options are opened are all questions of paramount concern. To address such questions fully requires deliberation of a moral and political character. What are its implicit values? Who is favored? Who is marginalized?

Constructionist inquiry approaches such issues in two ways. The first is liberating and attempts to place in question the taken-for-granted realities of both science and society. By realizing the culturally and historically situated character of the “obvious truths” of the times, such truths are rendered optional. One is freed to consider their values and limitations and to develop fresh alternatives. Thus, for example, investigators have explored cultural constructions of childhood, aging, gender, the body, health and illness, homosexuality, anorexia, and psychosis. In addition, turning attention to psychological research itself, researchers have explored the social construction of such putative realities as emotion, cognition, agency, and mental illness. As many believe, by unsettling comfortable assumptions of psychological essentialism, the way is open for a pluralist psychology in which all cultures can equally participate.

The second form of inquiry is more directly critical in its reflections on professional and cultural practices. The stage was set for such reflection by the critical psychiatry and feminist movements of the 1960 and 1970s. In both cases, scholars illuminated ways in which the assumptions shared within psychiatry and psychology were subtly engaged in systematic forms of oppression. The diagnostic labeling prevailing in psychiatry and psychology were viewed not only as cultural constructions but also as constructions that demonized significant sectors of the population. The successful resistance of the gay and lesbian movement to defining homosexuality

as mental illness was emblematic in this regard. For feminists, research in psychology tended to neglect sex differences or to paint a negative picture of women. With the addition of further critiques focused on such issues as the implicit racism, liberalism, heterosexism, and colonialism of much psychological study, the subdiscipline of critical psychology was given birth (see Fox, Prilleltensky, & Austin, 2009).

4. Methodological Pluralism

Traditional research in psychology is lodged within the empiricist tradition. Although constructionists recognize the potentials of such inquiry, they also point to numerous limitations. Simultaneously, they view the exclusive reliance on empirical methods as a vast impoverishment of the potentials for psychological inquiry. Thus, a strong methodological pluralism is advocated. Such pluralism invites a reinvigoration of frequently marginalized orientations to inquiry, such as the phenomenological, the case history, and the biographical. Often favored, because of the way in which they escape the tendencies toward manipulation and alienation favored by psychological experimentation, are narrative research, discourse analysis, ethnography, autoethnography, and portraiture. Consistent with the previously noted views of a pragmatic psychology, such inquiry is typically devoted to illuminating issues of broad social concern (e.g., the lives of marginalized people, cultural misunderstandings, people in pain, and common but unrecognized patterns in society). Invited as well are new developments that replace the traditional pursuit of “understanding the other” with attempts to join in collaborative activities through which social change may be achieved. Robust in its development is action research, now used around the world, to help those in need. Performance-oriented inquiry represents the cutting edge of development in research practices. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) provide further discussion of methodological pluralism.

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SUGGESTED READINGS

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See also: Constructivist Psychotherapy; Qualitative Research Methods