www.psy.dmu.ac.uk/michael/soc\_con\_disc.htm

**What is social constructionism?**

*Epistemology (not theory)*

Social constructionism stems from *epistemological* position - not an explanatory theory. It is an approach to psychology (and other bodies of knowledge) which focuses on *meaning* and *power.* It focuses on meaning and power because its epistemological position dictates that meaning and power *are all* that we really *can* claim to know about. It is called ‘social constructionism’ because it aims to account for the ways in which phenomena are socially constructed. For example, consider the various constructions of ‘war’ which are currently in dispute. We can see that there are multiple ways of constructing what a ‘war’ is and what it would *mean*, that these are often mutually-exclusive, and that they are developed from various ideological and political interests (i.e. *power).* For constructionists, all phenomena are like this. (Note that this is different from a ‘social theory’ - it does not say that a behaviour like ‘aggression’ can be explained by social variables; it says that ‘aggression’ *itself* is a social construct).

*Realism and relativism*

"Realism is the doctrine that an external world exists independently of our representations of it. Representations include perceptions, thoughts, language, beliefs and desires, as well as artefacts such as pictures and maps, and so include all the ways in which we could or do know and experience the world and ourselves. Relativism repudiates this doctrine, arguing that since any such external world is inaccessible to us in both principle and practice, it need not be postulated or considered." (Cromby & Nightingale, 1999, p. 6). Social constructionism has a relativist epistemology.

      Semantic relativism - the meanings of words are specific to languages and cannot be translated without loss of meaning [e.g. litost; ‘snow’].

      Ontological relativism - the existence of a thing (e.g. God, sorcery, individuality, addiction) is usually tied a conceptual system, which may be real for some people, but not others.

      Epistemological relativism - theories are historically-situated; best understood when located in the conditions of their emergence (e.g. intelligence).

      Moral relativism - the value and meaning of things and actions is culturally and historically specific (e.g. amok). (from Smith, M.J. 1998).

"The history of critical thought shows that both realism and relativism are typically deployed strategically. Writers ground their critiques in aspects of the world which they wish to make or remain real and, from this grounding, relativise aspects of that they want to question or deny. Which aspects of the world are to be relativised and which 'real-ised' is a choice typically shaped by moral, political or pragmatical precepts, not epistemology or ontology." (Cromby & Nightingale, 1999, p. 8).. For constructionists then, discourse *is* real.

*Origins*

**Mead (1934) - Symbolic interactionism -** children learn to interact with others by assimilating a shared system of symbolic representation, which allows for the  social negotiation of meaning, until they can enact a variety of roles, carry out internal dialogues between ‘I’ and ‘me,’ and relate to the social group as a ‘generalised other.’ Mead proposes that this is the basis of social order: Thus, through symbols, meaning is derived from interaction; humans are unique because they can imagine the effect of their symbolic communications upon others. Constructionism is keen on this idea of a shared system of meaning - less keen on the idea of a structured ‘self.’

**Vygotsky (Early 1930s) - Dialectical development and constructivism** - children internalise dialogues with others, gradually acquiring understanding of the social and cultural meanings of various practices. These meanings mediate the relationship between language and cognition: problem-solving is seen as an interactive process. Through interaction, children can extend their ‘internal’ limitations and exceed their ‘zone of proximal development.’ Construct*ivi*sm postulates social origins of mind; ‘strong’ construct*ion*ism, however, will not /can not account for ‘mind’ *per se* - only for representations *of* mind in social interaction.

**Saussure: Structuralism/Post-structuralism.** Structuralism originates from Saussure: " . . we cannot know the world on its own terms, but only through the conceptual and linguistic structures of our own culture . . . Structuralism's enterprise is to discover how people make sense of the world, not what the world is"  (Fisk, 1990; p.115). "Structuralism teaches us to look for the deep structures that underlie all cultural and communication systems . . . Language, myths, and symbolic systems […] provide unique insights into the way society organizes itself and the ways its members have of making sense of themselves and of their social experience" (Fisk, 1990; p.133). Jameson suggests that the aim of structuralism is: " . . an explicit search for the permanent structures of the mind itself, the organizational categories and forms through which the mind is able to experience the world, or to organize a meaning in what is essentially in itself meaningless." Constructionism would find the ultimately realist nature of this endeavour unpalatable, but *is* interested in culture as a set of structures (of meaning and power). In the post-structuralist view, however, the veracity of meaning is always ‘deferred.’ Because meaning is in dispute, it is the basis of political and ideological struggle. Constructionists and post-structuralists share a postmodern rejection of such concepts as objectivity, reality and truth.

**Goffman (1959) - The dramateurgical metaphor** - life is like theatre, self is a like ‘a multi-sided die,’ enacting its many roles through impression and expression management, and dramatic realisation. Success requires ‘belief in the part one is playing.’ - idea of performative quality of human life is embraced by social constructionism, but idea of any ‘inner actor’ is abandoned..

**Berger & Luckman (1966) - The social construction of reality**. Sociological account of constructed meaning: "Every individual is born into an objective social structure within which he encounters the significant others who are in charge of his socialization. These significant others are imposed on him. Their definitions of his situation are posited for him as objective reality. He is thus born into not only an objective social structure but also an objective social world. The significant others who mediate this world to him modify it in the course of mediating it. They select aspects of it in accordance with their own location in the social structure, and also by virtue of their individual, biographically rooted idiosyncrasies"  (p. 151).

**Gergen (1973) - ‘Social psychology as history’ -** psychology is not like a natural science - at best it can relate, describe, and sometimes try to explain the phenomena of social life, where those phenomena are specific to a particular time, place and culture - more like history. Gergen relates the analogy used by Kurt Back (1963) - social science as a system of communication. Researchers receive messages transmitted by participants. As raw data, such messages generate only ‘noise.’ Analysis applies a decoding device (i.e one of many possible theories) to this noise. If the resulting translation makes any sense (i.e corresponds to some cultural measure of ‘meaningfulness’) then it may be communicated back to the populace. Therefore there is a feedback loop.

      Evaluative bias of research - Research and researchers are not value free - ‘Value commitments are almost inevitable by-products of social existence, and as participants in society we can scarcely dissociate ourselves from these values in pursuing professional ends.’

      Liberating effects of knowledge - ‘As a general surmise, sophistication as to psychological principles liberates one from their behavioural implications.’

      Prevalent cultural values - People tend to react *against* theories which aim to predict their actions - ‘Valid theories about social behaviour constitute significant implements of social control. To the extent that an individual’s behaviour is predictable, he places himself in a position of vulnerability.’

*Principles*

**Anti-essentialism**

      “To be a self is not to be a certain kind of being, but to be in possession of a certain kind of theory.” (Harré, cited in Burr, 1995, p. 48.)

      “A central methodological assumption is that - instead of the inner dynamics of the individual psyche (romanticism), or the already determined characteristics of the external world (modernism) - we must study the continuous everyday temporal flow of contingent communicative action occurring between people.” (Shotter, 1995).

      “Most of us feel that there must be something, some ‘thing’, within us which functions as the causal centre of all our activities, the ‘I’ that wills our actions. But must there be?” (Shotter, 1989, p. 133.)

**Anti-naturalism**

Harré: “ . . . there is a science of meanings, skills, strategies and rules (psychology), and there is a science of neural structures and processes and the genetic sources of the basic forms that these take (biology)”. Bruner expresses this same idea by proposing “ . . . that it is culture, not biology, that shapes human life and the human mind, that gives meaning to action by situating its underlying intentional states in an interpretive system” (Bruner, 1990; p.34).

**Relativism**

“Language is not a transparent medium for conveying thought, but actually constructs the  world and the self through the course of its use.” (Wetherell & Maybin, 1996, p. 220).

Processes of representation reflect the social world - not a mental one. The person is indistinguishable from its roles, culture and relationships, and is continually being constructed through language and other systems of symbolic representation.

**Meaning**

      human beings we respond not to physical objects and events themselves, but to the meaning of events

      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

"People communicate to interpret events and to share those with others. For this reason it is believed that reality is constructed socially as a product of communication. [ . .] Our meanings and understandings arise from our communication with others. [ . . ] How we understand objects and how we behave towards them depend in large measure on the social reality in force" (Littlejohn, 1992; p.190-1).

**The problem of reflexivity**

People are psychologists, too …

“a/ Personal -

      how have own values, experiences, interests shaped the project?

      how has project changed researcher?

b/ Epistemological -

      how has the research question defined and limited what can be ‘found?’

      how have methods of collection and analysis ‘constructed’ the outcome?

      how could same question have been investigated differently?

      what phenomena are re-constructed in outcome? (Same as claimed?)” (Willig, 2001)

Burr (1995) identifies four basic assumptions of the social constructionist position:

      A critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge - The world does not present itself objectively to the observer, but is known through human experience which is largely influenced by language.

      Historical and cultural specificity - The categories in language used to classify things emerge from the social interaction within a group of people at a particular time and in a particular place. Categories of understanding, then, are situational.

      Knowledge is sustained by social process - How reality is understood at a given moment is determined by the conventions of communication in force at that time. The stability of social life determines how concrete our knowledge seems to be.

      Knowledge and social action go together - Reality is socially constructed by interconnected patterns of communication behaviour. Within a social group or culture, reality is defined not so much by individual acts, but by complex and organized patterns of ongoing actions.

*What is discourse?*

Constructionism encompasses various positions (crudely characterised as 'light' - e.g. Garfinkel-influenced - and 'dark' - e.g. Foucualdian - by Michaels, 1999) which all share a common epistemological sceptism about the nature of 'facts.' E.g. critical of fact-value errors, view of knowledge as contextual and historical, concern with language and construction of meaning, rather than with measurement and prediction of behaviour.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| *Influence* | Foucault | Garfinkel |
| *Michaels (1999)* | ‘Dark’ | ‘Light’ |
| *Exponent* | Parker (Manchester) | Potter (Loughborough) |
| *Primary focus* | Power | Meaning |
| *Discourse is ..* | **System of knowledge (an object)** | **Communicative action (an interplay)** |
|  |       Cultural resources for social actors |       Action orientations |
|  |       Powerful structures with political consequences |       Interpretative repertoires |
|  | **Interconnected text, shifting and developing over time** |  |
|  |       Subject positions |       Subject positions |
|  |       Functions of the text / system |       Functions of the interaction |

*What is positioning?*

      Discourse and narrative are powerful structures: they position social actors.

      Social actors will have often have recourse to more than one discourse or narrative in order to account for themselves: may take up preferred positions or draw upon preferred discourses.

      Subject positions have consequences - some are ‘warrant voice,’ some do not.

*‘Methods’*

      Conversation analysis (Antaki; Kitzinger)

      Discourse analysis (ethnomethodological tradition - Potter; Edwards)

      Foucauldian discourse analysis (Parker)

      Rhetorical analyses (Billig)

      Critical inquiry (Harre; Gergen)

      Q-methodology (Stainton Rogers, Capdevila, Stenner, Gleeson: Curt)

      Narrative analysis (structural - Mishler; Bruner)

      Narrative analysis (psychodynamic - Hollway; Wetherell)

      Narrative analysis (experiential - Josselstein and Leiblich; Crossley)

      Interpretative phenomenological analysis (Smith)

**What can we learn from discourse analysis?**

      ***How something may be understood***

      ***How something must be understood***

Example: Seymour-Smith, Wetherell & Phoenix, 2002 - *‘My wife ordered me to come!’ A discursive analysis of doctors’ and nurses’ accounts of men’s use of general practitioners*

“Health and illness are mediated through discourse. People learn how to tell stories of their illnesses, the conventional metaphors and imagery to use, and what is appropriate to include […] and similarly they learn what it is to be a ‘male patient.’ [This] prevailing discursive environment sets the normative parameters through which men perform their identity in the surgery, sets up the taken-for-granted and in so doing creates forms of deviance, and can render the experiences of some groups of men invisible.” (p.254).

*Interpretative repertoires -*

      Women are health conscious and responsible - men are not (‘so they don’t come until their wife makes them an appointment’)

      Men don’t talk about emotional issues (‘personal problems I doubt very much that a man would discuss with his mates’)

      Men are the serious users of the health service (‘whereas men you only tend to see if they are ill’)

*Formula -* ‘she told me to come and see you’ (men’s lack of accountability for their health excused by humour; women’s accountability means they ‘worry too much.’)

*Consequences -*

      Deviant cases: ‘feminised’ men.

      Invisible cases: single men; gay men.

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