

What is Social Constructionism?

Tom Andrews
University College Cork

Abstract

Social Constructionism has been instrumental in remodeling grounded theory. In attempting to make sense of the social world, social constructionists view knowledge as constructed as opposed to created. This paper discusses how social constructionists construct knowledge and argues that social constructionism is concerned with the nature of knowledge and how it is created and as such, it is unconcerned with ontological issues. Society is viewed as existing both as a subjective and an objective reality. Meaning is shared, thereby constituting a taken-for-granted reality. Grounded theorists understand knowledge as beliefs in which people can have reasonable confidence; a common sense understanding and consensual notion as to what constitutes knowledge. If it is accepted that social constructionism is not based on a relativist perspective, then it is compatible with Grounded Theory methodology.

Introduction

Social constructionism originated as an attempt to come to terms with the nature of reality. It emerged some thirty years ago and has its origins in sociology and has been associated with the post-modern era in qualitative research. This is linked to the hyperbolic doubt posed by Bacon, the idea about how observations are an accurate reflection of the world that is being observed (Murphy et al., 1998). Social constructionism is essentially an anti-realist, relativist stance (Hammersley, 1992). The influence of social constructionism is a current issue within grounded theory (Charmaz, 2000) and as such an understanding of its core concepts is important in evaluating its impact on the methodology. It is imperative for those considering grounded theory as a methodology for their research to appreciate the differences between grounded theory as originated by Glaser and Strauss (1997) and subsequently remodelled using a constructionist perspective.

Given its current and profound influence on grounded theory, constructionism needs to be understood so that they can better evaluate the nature and validity of the arguments surrounding its use. The terms constructivism and social constructionism tend to be used interchangeably and subsumed under the generic term 'constructivism' particularly by Charmaz (2000, 2006). Constructivism proposes that each individual mentally constructs the world of experience through cognitive processes while social constructionism has a social rather than an individual focus (Young & Colin, 2004). It is less interested if at all in the cognitive processes that accompany knowledge. The aim of this article is to familiarise readers with the idea of social constructionism. Its impact on grounded theory is the subject of a subsequent article.

Origins

Burr (1995) acknowledges the major influence of Berger and Luckmann (1991) in its development. In turn they acknowledge the influence of Mead, Marx, Schutz and Durkheim on their thinking. Their writing therefore constitutes a synthesis of

these influences. The origins of social constructionism can be traced in part to an interpretivist approach to thinking. Mead, one of the originators of symbolic interactionism, is the common link. However, my understanding is that while they may share common philosophical roots, social constructionism is distinct from interpretivism.

In common with constructionists, interpretivists in general focus on the process by which meanings are created, negotiated, sustained and modified (Schwandt, 2003). Proponents share the goal of understanding the world of lived experience from the perspective of those who live in it. Both arose as a challenge to scientism and have been influenced by the post-modernist movement. Interpretivism differentiates between the social and natural sciences and has as its goal the understanding of the meaning of social phenomena. While interpretivists value the human subjective experience, they seek to develop an objective science to study and describe it. There is then a tension evident between objective interpretation of subjective experiences. In other words, they attempt to apply a logical empiricist methodology to human inquiry. Schwandt (2003) views symbolic interactionism as an interpretative science.

Nature and Construction of Knowledge

Constructionists view knowledge and truth as created not discovered by the mind (Schwandt 2003) and supports the view that being a realist is not inconsistent with being a constructionist. One can believe that concepts are constructed rather than discovered yet maintain that they correspond to something real in the world. This is consistent with the idea of Berger and Luckmann (1991) and the subtle realism of Hammersley (1992) in that reality is socially defined but this reality refers to the subjective experience of every day life, how the world is understood rather than to the objective reality of the natural world. As Steedman (2000) notes, most of what is known and most of the knowing that is done is concerned with trying to make sense of what it is to be human, as opposed to scientific knowledge. Individuals or groups of individuals define this reality. This branch of constructionism is unconcerned with ontological questions or questions of causation. It is worth emphasising this, since a lot of the criticisms of constructionism arise from ascribing claims to it made beyond this social understanding of the world.

Berger and Luckmann (1991) are concerned with the nature and construction of knowledge: how it emerges and how it comes to have the significance for society. They views knowledge as created by the interactions of individuals within society which is central to constructionism (Schwandt, 2003). For Berger and Luckmann (1991), the division of labour, the emergence of more complex forms of knowledge and what they term economic surplus gives rise to expert knowledge, developed by people devoting themselves full-time to their subject. In turn, these experts lay claim to novel status and claim ultimate jurisdiction over that knowledge. For example, Hunter (1991) makes this claim for medicine, in that it has in time assumed much more control over defining illness and as a result has assumed control in situations well beyond its original mandate and so, enjoys a privileged position in society.

Berger and Luckmann (1991) view society as existing both as objective and subjective reality. The former is brought about through the interaction of people with the social world, with this social world in turn influencing people resulting in routinisation and habitualization. That is, any frequently repeated action becomes cast into a pattern, which can be reproduced without much effort. This frees people to engage in innovation rather than starting everything anew. In

time, the meaning of the habitualization becomes embedded as routines, forming a general store of knowledge. This is institutionalised by society to the extent that future generations experience this type of knowledge as objective. Additionally this objectivity is continuously reaffirmed in the individual's interaction with others.

The experience of society as subjective reality is achieved through primary, and to a lesser extent, secondary socialisation. The former involves being given an identity and a place in society. Indeed, Burr (1995) suggests that our identity originates not from inside the person but from the social realm. Socialisation takes place through significant others who mediate the objective reality of society, render it meaningful and in this way it is internalised by individuals (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). This is done through the medium of language. Burr (1995) comments that within social constructionism language is not an unproblematic means of transmitting thoughts and feelings, but in fact makes thought possible by constructing concepts. In other words, it is language that makes thoughts and concepts possible and not the other way around. Language predates concepts and provides a means of structuring the way the world is experienced.

Berger and Luckmann (1991) maintain that conversation is the most important means of maintaining, modifying and reconstructing subjective reality. Subjective reality is comprised of concepts that can be shared unproblematically with others. In other words, there is shared meaning and understanding, so much so that concepts do not need to be redefined each time they are used in everyday conversation and come to assume a reality which is by and large taken for granted. They use the example 'have a good day at the office' as an example of this. The words imply a whole world within which these propositions make sense.

Schwandt (2003) differentiates between radical and social constructionism, the latter has been outlined above, while the former is concerned with the idea that knowledge cannot represent or correspond to the world. In essence, that the world can only be known in relation to peoples' experience of it and not independently of that experience. Burningham and Cooper (1999) discuss constructionism in terms of being either contextual or strict. Contextual constructionism recognises objective reality and its influence, while the latter maintains a relativist position, that is the belief that there are multiple realities and all are meaningful. As will be discussed next, this relativist position is the source of most of the criticisms levelled at constructionism.

Realism and Relativism

The main criticisms levelled against social constructionism can be summarised by its perceived conceptualisation of realism and relativism. It is accused of being anti-realist, in denying that knowledge is a direct perception of reality (Craib 1997). Bury (1986) maintains that social constructionism challenges biomedical reality and questions apparently self-evident and stable realities, but he offers little evidence to support this contention. As an example, Bury (1986) claims that it views the discovery of diseases as themselves social events rather than having an objective reality. This criticism of social constructionism not recognising an objective reality is both widespread and common (Bury 1986; Burr 1995; Craib 1997; Schwandt, 2003; Sismondo 1993), that nothing exists beyond language (Bury 1986).

If it is accepted that researchers themselves construct a social world rather than merely representing some independent reality, then this is the source

of tension between realism and relativism (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). There is an increasing tendency within qualitative research to adopt the relativist position which leads Hammersley (1992) to question the usefulness of the findings generated from studies using this method, given that the multiplicity of accounts produced can each claim legitimacy. If all are legitimate and given the logical conclusion of relativism, then there is no reason to prefer one account to another. That is, the conclusions of research themselves constitute just another account and as such cannot claim to have precedence over any other account. The relevancy of such research can be questioned. In other words, if research is not contributing to knowledge in any meaningful way, then its usefulness may be questioned, particularly in relation to health care research (Murphy et al., 1998).

Realism and relativism represent two polarised perspectives on a continuum between objective reality at one end and multiple realities on the other. Both positions are problematic for qualitative research. Adopting a realist position ignores the way the researcher constructs interpretations of the findings and assumes that what is reported is a true and faithful interpretation of a knowable and independent reality. Relativism leads to the conclusion that nothing can ever be known for definite, that there are multiple realities, none having precedence over the other in terms of claims to represent the truth about social phenomena.

However, this is to confuse epistemology with claims about ontology and is a fundamental misunderstanding of the philosophy that underpins social constructionism. As outlined, social constructionism as discussed by Berger and Luckman (1991) makes no ontological claims, confining itself to the social construction of knowledge, therefore confining itself to making epistemological claims only. The idea that disease can and does exist as an independent reality is compatible with the social constructionist view. The naming of disease and indeed what constitutes disease is arguably a different matter and has the potential to be socially constructed. This is not the same as claiming that it has no independent existence beyond language. One can imagine the situation where a skin disorder such as psoriasis might be thought of as a contagious disease, but with continued empirical investigation, as knowledge increases about the condition, then attitudes to it and how it is constructed change. It is in this sense that disease is socially constructed but importantly makes no claims about its ontological status.

For Hammersley (1992) the solution is to adopt neither position but one midway between the two, one that he terms subtle realism. This acknowledges the existence of an independent reality, a world that has an existence independent of our perception of it, but denies that there can be direct access to that reality, emphasising instead representation not reproduction of social phenomena. Representation implies that it will be from the perspective of the researcher, thereby implicitly acknowledging reflexivity, which is acknowledgement that researchers influence the research process.

Consistent with this middle course, Hammersley (1992) accepts the usefulness of what he terms common-sense knowledge, while at the same time rejecting the notion that all such knowledge is valid in its own terms. Central to this is a rejection of the view that knowledge is independent of the researcher, whose reality can be known with certainty. Both realism and relativism share this view of knowledge in that both define it in this way as the starting point of their stances. In turn this results in the current dichotomy in qualitative research. The contention is that by avoiding such a definition, the negative implications for research associated with both philosophical perspectives can be avoided.

Hamilton (2002) offers an alternative definition of knowledge as beliefs in which one can have reasonable confidence in their validity or truth. This is appeals to what Hammersley (1992) considers a common sense understanding and consensual notion of what constitutes social knowledge, particularly in judging the validity or truth of such knowledge generated through research findings. This is a pragmatic view of knowledge based on how society resolves such matters in everyday life by judging its truth in relation to what is already known, not by appeal to philosophy. In a sense, this is an example of what Burr (1995) refers to as the self-referent system, where concepts can only be defined in terms of other concepts existing in the same language system.

In appealing for the adoption of a subtle realist approach, Hammersley (1992) is trying to resolve the seemingly intractable issue of realism versus relativism. In support of this, Murphy et al. (1998) conclude that qualitative research resists the tendency to fix meanings but instead draw inferences about meaning. However the current trend within qualitative research is not to draw such a sharp distinction between the realism and relativism (Danermark et al., 2002; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005)

In response to the realist critique, Sismondo (1993) differentiates between strict, radical or extreme constructionism and mild or contextual constructionism. He maintains that criticism is levelled at the former, which is said to deny physical reality. Burningham and Cooper (1999) note that in the critique of constructionism very few empirical studies adopting this approach are ever discussed. In other words, critics fail to evaluate the evidence as to how the theory is applied in practice in order to support their critique. In a review of studies using social constructionism, Sismondo (1993) claims that the vast majority of studies adopt the mild or contextual form of analysis, where a distinction is maintained between what participants believe or claim about the social world and what is in fact already known. In practice social constructionists recognise reality and Sismondo (1993) concludes that the realist critique is misguided in that it does not fit what is actually going on in empirical studies. Burningham and Cooper (1999) have summarised the strict constructionist position as a scepticism about ontological claims and not as an ontological claim about the non-existence of reality, that is, while they do not deny the existence of reality, they maintain that the meaning of reality is socially constructed.

In terms of social constructionism, the arguments in relation to relativism are similar to those outlined earlier. Relativism maintains that because there are multiple realities, there are multiple interpretations of those realities. This leads in the opinion of Bury (1986) to a circular argument, in that there is no way of judging one account of reality as better than another. Craib (1997) in particular ridicules social constructionism for its alleged position on the realist-relativist argument and views it as a comforting collective belief rather than a theoretical position. He engages in what Hammersley (1992) terms a nihilist argument, namely the contention that because social constructionism is itself a social construct, then it has no more claim to be advanced as an explanation than any other theory. This results in there being no notion of what constitutes truth (Burr 1995). Hammersley (1992) refers to this as the self-refuting character of relativism and attempts to counter it by proposing the adoption of subtle realism, as outlined previously. Radical social constructionism is a trivial position (Murphy et al., 1998).

This gives rise to the further criticism that research using social constructionist framework lacks any ability to change things because there is nothing against which to judge the findings of research (Bury, 1986). In this sense it becomes a methodological issue. This results in political inertia because

of the reluctance of social constructionist research to make any recommendations (Bury, 1986). Burningham and Cooper (1999) maintain that this arises because of a misreading of the process in that researchers adopting this approach do not ground their arguments in, or discredit opposing arguments by comparing them unfavourably with objective reality, that is, in presenting their findings, social constructionists do not present them in objectivist terms, but rely instead on the plausibility of their findings. In other words, they set out to have their findings accepted by presenting a convincing argument rather than arguing that their results are definitive. This is consistent with the idea in constructionism that the findings of research are one of many discourses. The suggestion here is that far from being neutral, social constructionism can generate real debate and lead to change.

There is another sense in which change becomes problematic and this is related to what social constructionism has to say about human agency, that is, human activity, which according to Burr (1995) has not been fully addressed within social constructionism. Berger and Luckmann (1991) maintain that change is brought about by human activity. They note that while reality is always socially defined, it is individuals and groups of individuals who define it. People always try to present themselves and their version of events in such a way that it will prevail over other versions (Burr 1995). For Burr (1995) this is linked to power, in that it tends to be the more powerful who are the most successful at having their version of events predominate. This suggests that social constructionism supports the idea that people can indeed be agents of change but nonetheless, Burr (1995) argues that this is one of the least developed areas of constructionism.

Craib (1997), a sociologist and psychotherapist, suggests that like interactionism, social constructionism is no more than a coping mechanism for dealing with rapid change; that social constructionists embrace change in order to avoid having to defend or justify their position on anything. This enables them to claim that their position, or any other, is just another social construct, no position having precedence over any other. He views social constructionism as a form of interactionism. As outlined, interactionism is different from constructionism. Craib (1997) seems to have confused some shared philosophical roots with being one and the same theory. It suggests that Craib (1997) has a selective understanding of social constructionism and that his criticisms arise from this partial understanding. Additionally, his arguments assume that all social constructionists hold a relativist position. As outlined earlier, this is not so.

Conclusion

Social constructionism accepts that there is an objective reality. It is concerned with how knowledge is constructed and understood. It has therefore an epistemological not an ontological perspective. Criticisms and misunderstanding arise when this central fact is misinterpreted. This is most evident in debates and criticisms surrounding realism and relativism. The words of Kirk and Miller (1986) are relevant when they suggest that the search for a final, absolute truth be left to philosophers and theologians. Social constructionism places great emphasis on everyday interactions between people and how they use language to construct their reality. It regards the social practices people engage in as the focus of enquiry. This is very similar to the focus of grounded theory but without the emphasis on language. Social constructionism that views society as existing both as objective and subjective reality is fully compatible with classical grounded theory, unlike constructionist grounded theory which takes a relativist position. Relativism is not compatible with classical grounded theory. Social constructionism as influence by Berger and

Luckman makes no ontological claims. Therefore choosing constructionist grounded theory based on the ontological assumptions of the researcher seems incompatible with the idea of social constructionism. How this stance has influenced and remodelled grounded theory into so-called constructionist grounded theory will be the subject of another article.

References

- Berger, P. & Luckmann, T. (1991). *The social construction of reality*. London: Penguin Books.
- Burningham, K. & Cooper, G. (1999). Being Constructive: Social constructionism and the environment. *Sociology* 33(2), 297-316.
- Burr, V. (2003). *Social Constructionism* (2nd Ed). London: Routledge.
- Bury, M. (1986). Social constructionism and the development of medical sociology. *Sociology of Health and Illness* 8(2), 137-169.
- Charmaz, K. (2000). Grounded theory objectivist and constructivist method. In Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y. (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 509-535). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage
- Charmaz, K (2006). *Constructing Grounded Theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Craib, I. (1997). Social Constructionism as a Social Psychosis. *Sociology* 31(1), 1-15.
- Denzin, N. & Lincoln, Y. (2005). Introduction: the discipline and practice of qualitative research. In Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y. (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 1-17). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Glaser, B. (1978). *Theoretical Sensitivity: Advances in the methodology of grounded theory*. Mill Valley, CA: Sociology Press.
- Glaser, B. and Strauss, A. (1967). *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for qualitative research*. New York: Aldine De Gruyter.
- Hamilton, D. (2002). Traditions, preferences, and postures in applied qualitative research. In Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y. (Eds.), *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (pp. 60-69). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Hammersley, M. (1992). *What's Wrong with Ethnography?* Routledge, London.
- Hammersley, M. & Atkinson, P. (2007). *Ethnography: Principals in practice* (3rd Ed.). London: Routledge.
- Kirk, J. & Miller, M. (1986). *Reliability in Qualitative Research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

- Murphy, E., Dingwall, R., Greatbatch, & Parker, P. (1998). Qualitative research methods in health technology assessment: a review of the literature. *Health Technology Assessment* 2(16).
- Schwandt, T. A. (2003). Three epistemological stances for qualitative inquiry: Interpretativism, hermeneutics and social constructionism. In Denzin, N. and Lincoln, Y (Eds.), *The Landscape of Qualitative Research: Theories and issues.* (pp. 292-331). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Sismondo, S. (1993) Some social constructions. *Social Studies of Science* 23, 515-553.
- Steedman, P. (2000). On the relations between seeing, interpreting and knowing. In Steier, F. (Ed.), *Research and Reflexivity*, (pp. 53-62). London: Sage.
- Young, R & Collin, A. (2004). Introduction: constructivism and social constructionism in the career field. *Journal of Vocational Behaviour* 64(3), 373-388.