

# Social Constructs: How We Shape Reality

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Social constructionism or the social construction of reality (also social concept) is a theory of knowledge in sociology and communication theory that examines the development of jointly constructed understandings of the world that form the basis for shared assumptions about reality, also known as tulpa. The theory centers on the notions that human beings rationalize their experience by creating models of the social world and share and reify these models through language.

### **Definition**

A social construct or construction concerns the meaning, notion, or connotation placed on an object or event by a society, and adopted by the inhabitants of that society with respect to how they view or deal with the object or event. In that respect, a social construct as an idea would be widely accepted as natural by the society, but may or may not represent a reality shared by those outside the society, and would be an "invention or artifice of that society".

A major focus of social constructionism is to uncover the ways in which individuals and groups participate in the construction of their perceived social reality. It involves looking at the ways social phenomena are developed, institutionalized, known, and made into tradition by humans.

### **Origins**

In terms of background, social constructionism is rooted in "symbolic interactionism" and "phenomenology." With Berger and Luckman's *The Social Construction of Reality* published in 1966, this concept found its hold. More than four decades later, a sizable number of theory and research pledged to the basic tenet that people "make their social and cultural worlds at the same time these worlds make them." It is a viewpoint that uproots social processes "simultaneously playful and serious, by which reality is both revealed and concealed, created and destroyed by our activities." It provides a substitute to the Western intellectual tradition "where the researcher "earnestly seeks certainty in a representation of reality by means of propositions."

In social constructionist terms, "taken-for-granted realities" are cultivated from "interactions between and among social agents;" furthermore, reality is not some objective truth "waiting to be uncovered through positivist scientific inquiry." Rather, there can be "multiple realities that compete for truth and legitimacy." Social constructionism understands the "fundamental role of language and communication" and this understanding has "contributed to the linguistic turn" and more recently the "turn to discourse theory." The majority of social constructionists abide by the belief that "language does not mirror reality; rather, it constitutes it."

A broad definition of social constructionism has its supporters and critics in the organizational sciences. A constructionist approach to various organizational and managerial phenomena appear

to be more commonplace and on the rise.

Andy Lock and Tom Strong trace some of the fundamental tenets of social constructionism back to the work of the 18th century Italian political philosopher, rhetorician, historian, and jurist Giambattista Vico.

Berger and Luckmann give credit to Max Scheler as a large influence as he created the idea of Sociology of knowledge which influenced social construction theory.

According to Lock and Strong, other influential thinkers whose work has affected the development of social constructionism are: Edmund Husserl, Alfred Schutz, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Martin Heidegger, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Paul Ricoeur, Jürgen Habermas, Emmanuel Levinas, Mikhail Bakhtin, Valentin Volosinov, Lev Vygotsky, George Herbert Mead, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Gregory Bateson, Harold Garfinkel, Erving Goffman, Anthony Giddens, Michel Foucault, Ken Gergen, Mary Gergen, Rom Harre, and John Shotter.

### **Social constructionist analysis**

"Social construction" may mean many things to many people. Ian Hacking, having examined a wide range of books and articles with titles of the form "The social construction of X" or "Constructing X", argues that when something is said to be "socially constructed", this is shorthand for at least the following two claims:

- (0) In the present state of affairs, X is taken for granted; X appears to be inevitable.:12
- (1) X need not have existed, or need not be at all as it is. X, or X as it is at present, is not determined by the nature of things; it is not inevitable.:6

Hacking adds that the following claims are also often, though not always, implied by the use of the phrase "social construction":

- (2) X is quite bad as it is.
- (3) We would be much better off if X were done away with, or at least radically transformed.:6

Thus a claim that gender is socially constructed probably means that gender, as currently understood, is not an inevitable result of biology, but highly contingent on social and historical processes. In addition, depending on who is making the claim, it may mean that our current understanding of gender is harmful, and should be modified or eliminated, to the extent possible.

According to Hacking, "social construction" claims are not always clear about exactly what isn't "inevitable", or exactly what "should be done away with." Consider a hypothetical claim that quarks

are "socially constructed". On one reading, this means that quarks themselves are not "inevitable" or "determined by the nature of things." On another reading, this means that our idea (or conceptualization, or understanding) of quarks is not "inevitable" or "determined by the nature of things". The distinction between "quarks themselves" and "our idea (or conceptualization, or understanding) of quarks" will undoubtedly trouble some with a philosophical bent. Hacking's distinction is based on intuitive metaphysics, with a split between things out in the world, on one hand, and ideas thereof in our minds, on the other. Hacking is less advocating a serious, particular metaphysics than he is suggesting a useful way to analyse claims about "social construction":21-24

Hacking is much more sympathetic to the second reading than the first.:68-70 Furthermore, he argues that, if the second reading is taken, there need not always be a conflict between saying that quarks are "socially constructed" and saying that they are "real":29-30 In our gender example, this means that while a legitimate biological basis for gender may exist, some of society's perceptions of gender may be socially constructed.

The stronger first position, however, is more-or-less an inevitable corollary of Willard Van Orman Quine's concept of ontological relativity, and particularly of the Duhem-Quine thesis. That is, according to Quine and like-minded thinkers (who are not usually characterized as social constructionists) there is no single privileged explanatory framework that is closest to "the things themselves"--every theory has merit only in proportion to its explanatory power.

As we step from the phrase to the world of human beings, "social construction" analyses can become more complex. Hacking briefly examines Helène Moussa's analysis of the social construction of "women refugees":9-10 According to him, Moussa's argument has several pieces, some of which may be implicit:

Canadian citizens' idea of "the woman refugee" is not inevitable, but historically contingent. (Thus the idea or category "the woman refugee" can be said to be "socially constructed".)

Women coming to Canada to seek asylum are profoundly affected by the category of "the woman refugee". Among other things, if a woman does not "count" as a "woman refugee" according to the law, she may be deported, and forced to return to very difficult conditions in her homeland.

Such women may modify their behaviour, and perhaps even their attitudes towards themselves, in order to gain the benefits of being classified as a "woman refugee".

If such a woman does not modify her behaviour, she should be considered un-Canadian and as such should not be admitted to citizenship.

Hacking suggests that this third part of the analysis, the "interaction" between a socially constructed category and the individuals that are actually or potentially included in that category, is present in many "social construction" analyses involving types of human beings.

"Social construction-ism 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 are relevant when they suggest that the search for a final, absolute truth be left to philosophers and theologians. Social construction-ism 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".

## **Applications**

### **Personal construct psychology**

Since its appearance in the 1950s, personal construct psychology (PCP) has mainly developed as a constructivist theory of personality and a system of transforming individual meaning-making processes, largely in therapeutic contexts. It was based around the notion of persons as scientists who form and test theories about their worlds. Therefore, it represented one of the first attempts to appreciate the constructive nature of experience and the meaning persons give to their experience. Social constructionism (SC), on the other hand, mainly developed as a form of a critique, aimed to transform the oppressing effects of the social meaning-making processes. Over the years, it has grown into a cluster of different approaches, with no single SC position. However, different approaches under the generic term of SC are loosely linked by some shared assumptions about language, knowledge, and reality.

A usual way of thinking about the relationship between PCP and SC is treating them as two separate entities that are similar in some aspects, but also very different in others. This way of conceptualizing this relationship is a logical result of the circumstantial differences of their emergence. In subsequent analyses these differences between PCP and SC were framed around several points of tension, formulated as binary oppositions: personal/social; individualist/relational; agency/structure; constructivist/constructionist. Although some of the most important issues in contemporary psychology are elaborated in these contributions, the polarized positioning also sustained the idea of a separation between PCP and SC, paving the way for only limited opportunities for dialogue between them.

Reframing the relationship between PCP and SC may be of use in both the PCP and the SC communities. On one hand, it extends and enriches SC theory and points to benefits of applying the PCP "toolkit" in constructionist therapy and research. On the other hand, the reframing contributes to PCP theory and points to new ways of addressing social construction in therapeutic conversations.

## **Educational psychology**

Social constructivism has been studied by many educational psychologists, who are concerned with its implications for teaching and learning. For more on the psychological dimensions of social constructivism, see the work of Ernst von Glasersfeld and A. Sullivan Palincsar.

## **Systemic therapy**

Systemic therapy is a form of psychotherapy which seeks to address people as people in relationship, dealing with the interactions of groups and their interactional patterns and dynamics.

## **Teleology of social construction**

The concepts of weak and strong as applied to opposing philosophical positions, "isms", inform a teleology - the goal-oriented, meaningful or "final end" of an interpretation of reality. "Isms" are not personal opinions, but the extreme, modal, formulations that actual persons, individuals, can then consider, and take a position between. There are opposing philosophical positions concerning the feasibility of co-creating a common, shared, social reality, called weak and strong.

John R. Searle does not elucidate the terms strong and weak in his book *The Construction of Social Reality*, but he clearly uses them in his Chinese room argument, where he debates the feasibility of creating a computing machine with a sharable understanding of reality, and he adds "We are precisely such machines." Strong artificial intelligence (Strong AI) is the bet that computer programmers will somehow eventually achieve a computing machine with a mind of its own, and that it will eventually be more powerful than a human mind. Weak AI bets they won't.

David Deutsch in his book *The Fabric of Reality* uses a form of strong Turing principle to share Frank Tipler's view of the final state of the universe as an omnipotent (but not omniscient), Omega point, computer. But this computer is a society of creative thinkers, or people (albeit posthuman transhuman persons), having debates in order to generate information, in the never-ending attempt to attain omniscience of this physics--its evolutionary forms, its computational abilities, and the methods of its epistemology--having an eternity to do so. (p. 356)

Because both the Chinese room argument and the construction of social reality deal with Searle and his debates, and because they both use weak and strong to denote a philosophical position, and because both debate the programmability of "the other", it is worth noting the correspondence that "strong AI" is strong social constructionism, and "weak AI" is weak social constructivism.

Strong social constructivism says "none are able to communicate either a full reality or an accurate ontology, therefore my position must impose, by a sort of divine right, my observer-relative epistemology", whereas weak social constructivism says "none are able to know a full

reality, therefore we must cooperate, informing and conveying an objective ontology as best we can."

### **Weak teleology**

Weak social constructionism sees the underlying, objective, "brute fact" elements of the class of languages and functional assignments of human, metaphysical, reality. Brute facts are all facts that are not institutional (metaphysical, social agreement) facts. The skeptic portrays the weak aspect of social constructivism, and wants to spend effort debating the institutional realities.

Harvard psychologist Steven Pinker writes that "some categories really are social constructions: they exist only because people tacitly agree to act as if they exist. Examples include money, tenure, citizenship, decorations for bravery, and the presidency of the United States."

In a similar vein, Stanley Fish has suggested that baseball's "balls and strikes" are social constructions.

Both Fish and Pinker agree that the sorts of objects indicated here can be described as part of what John Searle calls "social reality.":<sup>22</sup> In particular, they are, in Searle's terms, ontologically subjective but epistemologically objective.<sup>63</sup> "Social facts" are temporally, ontologically, and logically dependent on "brute facts." For example, "money" in the form of its raw materials (rag, pulp, ink) as constituted socially for barter (for example by a banking system) is a social fact of "money" by virtue of (i) collectively willing and intending (ii) to impose some particular function (purpose for which), (iii) by constitutive rules atop the "brute facts." "Social facts have the remarkable feature of having no analogue among physical brute facts" (34). The existence of language is itself constitutive of the social fact (37), which natural or brute facts do not require. Natural or "brute" facts exist independently of language; thus a "mountain" is a mountain in every language and in no language; it simply is what it is.

Searle illustrates the evolution of social facts from brute facts by the constitutive rule: X counts as Y in C. "The Y terms has to assign a new status that the object does not already have just in virtue of satisfying the Y term; and there has to be collective agreement, or at least acceptance, both in the imposition of that status on the stuff referred to by the X term and about the function that goes with that status. Furthermore, because the physical features brute facts specified by the X term are insufficient by themselves to guarantee the fulfillment of the assigned function specified by the Y term, the new status and its attendant functions have to be the sort of things that can be constituted by collective agreement or acceptance."

It is true that language is not a "brute fact," that it is an institutional fact, a human convention, a metaphysical reality (that happens to be physically uttered), but Searle points out that there are language-independent thoughts "noninstitutional, primitive, biological inclinations and cognitions

not requiring any linguistic devices," and that there are many "brute facts" amongst both humans and animals that are truths that should not be altered in the social constructs because language does not truly constitute them, despite the attempt to institute them for any group's gain: money and property are language dependent, but desires (thirst, hunger) and emotions (fear, rage) are not.<sup>62</sup> (Descartes describes the difference between imagination as a sort of vision, or image, and intellect as conceptualizing things by symbolic manipulation.) Therefore, there is doubt that society or a computer can be completely programmed by language and images, (because there is a programmable, emotive effect of images that derives from the language of judgment towards images).

Finally, against the strong theory and for the weak theory, Searle insists, "it could not be the case, as some have maintained, that all facts are institutional facts, that there are no brute facts, because the structure of institutional facts reveals that they are logically dependent on brute facts. To suppose that all facts are institutional would produce an infinite regress or circularity in the account of institutional facts. In order that some facts are institutional, there must be other facts that are brute. This is the consequence of the logical structure of institutional facts."<sup>56</sup>

Ian Hacking, Canadian philosopher of science, insists, "the notion that everything is socially constructed has been going the rounds. John Searle argues vehemently (and in my opinion cogently) against universal constructionism."<sup>24</sup> "Universal social constructionism is descended from the doctrine that I once named linguistic idealism and attributed, only half in jest, to Richard Nixon. Linguistic idealism is the doctrine that only what is talked about exists, nothing has reality until it is spoken of, or written about. This extravagant notion is descended from Berkeley's idealism, which we call idealism: the doctrine that all that exists is mental."<sup>24</sup> "They are a part of what John Searle calls social reality. His book is titled the Construction of Social Reality, and as I explained elsewhere, that is not a social construction book at all."<sup>12</sup>

Hacking observes, "the label 'social constructionism' is more code than description":<sup>15</sup> of every Leftist, Marxist, Freudian, and Feminist PostModernist to call into question every moral, sex, gender, power, and deviant claim as just another essentialist claim--including the claim that members of the male and female sex are inherently different, rather than historically and socially constructed. Hacking observes that his 1995 simplistic dismissal of the concept actually revealed to many readers the outrageous implications of the theorists: Is child abuse a real evil, or a social construct, asked Hacking? His dismissive attitude, "gave some readers a way to see that there need be no clash between construction and reality,"<sup>29</sup> inasmuch as "the metaphor of social construction once had excellent shock value, but now it has become tired."<sup>35</sup>

Informally, they require human practices to sustain their existence, but they have an effect that is (basically) universally agreed upon. The disagreement lies in whether this category should be called "socially constructed." Ian Hacking argues that it should not. Furthermore, it is not clear that

authors who write "social construction" analyses ever mean "social construction" in Pinker's sense. ". If they never do, then Pinker (probably among others) has misunderstood the point of a social constructionist argument.

To understand how weak social constructionism can conclude that metaphysics (a human affair) is not the entire "reality," see the arguments against the study metaphysics. This inability to accurately share the full reality, even given time for a rational conversation, is similarly proclaimed by weak artificial intelligence.

## **History and development**

### **Berger and Luckmann**

Constructionism became prominent in the U.S. with Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckmann's 1966 book, *The Social Construction of Reality*. Berger and Luckmann argue that all knowledge, including the most basic, taken-for-granted common sense knowledge of everyday reality, is derived from and maintained by social interactions. When people interact, they do so with the understanding that their respective perceptions of reality are related, and as they act upon this understanding their common knowledge of reality becomes reinforced. Since this common sense knowledge is negotiated by people, human typifications, significations and institutions come to be presented as part of an objective reality, particularly for future generations who were not involved in the original process of negotiation. For example, as parents negotiate rules for their children to follow, those rules confront the children as externally produced "givens" that they cannot change. Berger and Luckmann's social constructionism has its roots in phenomenology. It links to Heidegger and Edmund Husserl through the teaching of Alfred Schutz, who was also Berger's PhD adviser.

### **Narrative turn**

During the 1970s and 1980s, social constructionist theory underwent a transformation as constructionist sociologists engaged with the work of Michel Foucault and others as a narrative turn in the social sciences was worked out in practice. This particularly affected the emergent sociology of science and the growing field of science and technology studies. In particular, Karin Knorr-Cetina, Bruno Latour, Barry Barnes, Steve Woolgar, and others used social constructionism to relate what science has typically characterized as objective facts to the processes of social construction, with the goal of showing that human subjectivity imposes itself on those facts we take to be objective, not solely the other way around. A particularly provocative title in this line of thought is Andrew Pickering's *Constructing Quarks: A Sociological History of Particle Physics*. At the same time, Social Constructionism shaped studies of technology - the Sofield, especially on the Social construction of technology, or SCOT, and authors as Wiebe Bijker, Trevor Pinch, Maarten van Wesel, etc. Despite its common perception as objective, mathematics is not immune

to social constructionist accounts. Sociologists such as Sal Restivo and Randall Collins, mathematicians including Reuben Hersh and Philip J. Davis, and philosophers including Paul Ernest have published social constructionist treatments of mathematics.

## Postmodernism

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 worldviews 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 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 is social constructionism, which has been booming since the 1980s."

## Criticisms

Social constructionism falls toward the nurture end of the spectrum of the larger nature and nurture debate. Consequently, critics have argued that it generally ignores biological influences on behaviour or culture, or suggests that they are unimportant to achieve an understanding of human behaviour. The view of most psychologists and social scientists is that behaviour is a complex outcome of both biological and cultural influences. Other disciplines, such as evolutionary psychology, behaviour genetics, behavioural neuroscience, epigenetics, etc., take a nature-nurture interactionism approach to understand behaviour or cultural phenomena.

In 1996, to illustrate what he believed to be the intellectual weaknesses of social constructionism and postmodernism, physics professor Alan Sokal submitted an article to the academic journal *Social Text* deliberately written to be incomprehensible but including phrases and jargon typical of the articles published by the journal. The submission, which was published, was an experiment to see if the journal would "publish an article liberally salted with nonsense if (a) it sounded good and (b) it flattered the editors' ideological preconceptions." The Postmodernism Generator is a computer program that is designed to produce similarly incomprehensible text. In 1999, Sokal, with coauthor Jean Bricmont published the book *Fashionable Nonsense*, which criticized

postmodernism and social constructionism.

Philosopher Paul Boghossian has also written against social constructionism. He follows Ian Hacking's argument that many adopt social constructionism because of its potentially liberating stance: if things are the way that they are only because of our social conventions, as opposed to being so naturally, then it should be possible to change them into how we would rather have them be. He then states that social constructionists argue that we should refrain from making absolute judgements about what is true and instead state that something is true in the light of this or that theory. Countering this, he states:

But it is hard to see how we might coherently follow this advice. Given that the propositions which make up epistemic systems are just very general propositions about what absolutely justifies what, it makes no sense to insist that we abandon making absolute particular judgements about what justifies what while allowing us to accept absolute general judgements about what justifies what. But in effect this is what the epistemic relativist is recommending.

Later in the same work, Boghossian severely constrains the requirements of relativism. He states that instead of believing that any world view is just as true as any other (cultural relativism), we should believe that:

If we were to encounter an actual, coherent, fundamental, genuine alternative to our epistemic system, C2, whose track record was impressive enough to make us doubt the correctness of our own system, C1, we would not be able to justify C1 over C2 even by our own lights.

Woolgar and Pawluch argue that constructionists tend to 'ontological gerrymander' social conditions in and out of their analysis. Following this point, Thibodeaux argued that constructionism can both separate and combine a subject and their effective environment. To resolve this he argued that objective conditions should be used when analyzing how perspectives are motivated.

Social constructionism has been criticized by evolutionary psychologists, including Steven Pinker in his book *The Blank Slate*. John Tooby and Leda Cosmides used the term "standard social science model" to refer to social-science philosophies that they argue fail to take into account the evolved properties of the brain.

### **Social pre-wiring**

The social pre-wiring hypothesis stands at odds with social constructionism's ignorance of biological affects on a social being's behavior.

The social pre-wiring hypothesis refers to the ontogeny of social interaction. Also informally referred to as, "wired to be social." The theory questions whether there is a propensity to socially

oriented action already present before birth. Research in the theory concludes that newborns are born into the world with a unique genetic wiring to be social.

Circumstantial evidence supporting the social pre-wiring hypothesis can be revealed when examining newborns' behavior. Newborns, not even hours after birth, have been found to display a preparedness for social interaction. This preparedness is expressed in ways such as their imitation of facial gestures. This observed behavior cannot be contributed to any current form of socialization or social construction. Rather, newborns most likely inherit to some extent social behavior and identity through genetics.

Principal evidence of this theory is uncovered by examining Twin pregnancies. The main argument is, if there are social behaviors that are inherited and developed before birth, then one should expect twin fetuses to engage in some form of social interaction before they are born. Thus, ten fetuses were analyzed over a period of time using ultrasound techniques. Using kinematic analysis, the results of the experiment were that the twin fetuses would interact with each other for longer periods and more often as the pregnancies went on. Researchers were able to conclude that the performance of movements between the co-twins were not accidental but specifically aimed.

The social pre-wiring hypothesis was proved correct, "The central advance of this study is the demonstration that 'social actions' are already performed in the second trimester of gestation. Starting from the 14th week of gestation twin fetuses plan and execute movements specifically aimed at the co-twin. These findings force us to predate the emergence of social behavior: when the context enables it, as in the case of twin fetuses, other-directed actions are not only possible but predominant over self-directed actions."

### **Social construction theory in communication**

A bibliographic review of social construction theory as used within communication has now been published, providing a good overview of resources from that disciplinary perspective.