

Two practices, one perspective, many constructs: on the implications of social constructionism on scientific research and therapy

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Abstract

In our daily practice we have regularly been confronted with an uneasy feeling about how scientific research should be considered. In addition, we were intrigued by the 'new' approaches that arise in systemic thinking and therapy. This paper is the result of our search for alternative ways of understanding science and therapy, looking for a frame that would fit our own ideas.

First we will consider the basics of social constructionism. Next, we'll explore the consequences of social constructionism on science and therapy, placing the emphasis on science. By way of conclusion, we will consider the strengths of the social constructionist thought model.

This paper is based on different insights that are relatively current in social constructionist literature (e.g. Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1994; 1999; Semin & Gergen, 1990)

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Social constructionism

Firstly, we have to dwell on the fact that social constructionism can not be considered as an (explanatory) theory, but rather as an epistemology, in the sense of a philosophy of knowledge. This means we are talking about a philosophical, contemplative vision, more than a concrete, applicable theory. No ready-made answers, which is the reason for this exercise in thought.

With the postmodern notion that knowledge is not a reproduction of reality as the basic presumption, several assumptions form the base of social constructionism. However, the reader should bear in mind that social constructionism should not be confused with constructivism. Both terms were mixed-up, particularly in the 1980s, but they define two distinctively different tendencies. Although they hold the notion that people create a construct of reality in common, their theoretical background and focus are different. Whereas constructivism has its roots in the biological and physiological characteristics of individual perception and consequently has a very individual focus, social constructionism is a community-philosophy in which the group and the interaction between the group members is the sole focus.

Let us overview three basic assumptions:

1. First, the concept of 'construct'. Social constructionism emphasizes, as does constructivism, the construction we make of reality. To put it simply: people construct stories, ideas and theories to help them deal with reality. Our knowledge never objectively reflects the external reality. It is always a creation that contains our own experiences, perceptions and values.

2. The concept 'social'. In contradiction with constructivism social constructionism claims that the constructs we make of the world around us can only be made through interaction with others. Knowledge only exists when it is shared with another person. Constructs are shared stories that enable people to function as a group in a larger whole. Social constructionism emphasizes that these constructs are pragmatic; they must be useful in everyday life. That is why we can consider them as agreements made within a community to create a livable environment. The importance of culture and history should be underlined. The knowledge we have can be considered as a "negotiated creation of meaning", strongly rooted in previous and other agreements. An important consequence is that everything we know is local and dynamic. It is negotiated between people in a certain context at a given moment. "Local", here, means: 'in a specific context, community'. It does not mean a limited group of people.

3. The role of language. Like many other epistemologies, social constructionism gives language an establishing role.

Because all knowledge is the result of negotiation through interaction, language is a crucial factor. In our society we give meaning to events by describing them with words. This paper is example enough in itself: how else than through language would we be able to communicate complex information to each other? Without language our communication would be minimum. Consequently we wouldn't be able to share knowledge or develop shared constructs. We cannot describe what is 'out there', as opposed to what is 'in here'. From the moment we try to describe 'what is', we enter the world of discourse, of 'talking about'.

Language cannot be considered as a direct representation of the world outside language. Processes of representation reflect the social world, not a mental one. In other words: words and statements become meaningful only in relation with other words and statements, language itself is an agreement. It is an instrument created by humans, with a specific use and no meaning outside the context of this use.

In short, social constructionism focuses on the creation of meaning, on the existence, the development and the role of joint meaning. Gergen, an important author with regard to social constructionism, summarizes: "It is human interchange that gives language its capacity to mean, and it must stand as the critical locus of concern" (Gergen, 1994, p. 264).

One of the most important criticisms on social constructionism (and on the basic notion of postmodernism) is that this way of looking at the world leads to nihilism and relativism. After all, if every story and every view of the world is equally meaningful, there is a danger of ending up in a radical individualism where 'anything goes'. Everybody would be able to justify his behaviour and ideas simply by referring to the individuality of knowledge. Gergen stresses the importance of solidarity as a central concept for a society. According to him, shared negotiated knowledge is the basis for the development of shared values and standards and for a renewed emphasis on interaction and combined action. Because there is not one single truth, our choices have to be based on values. We have to take responsibility for the statements we make and the actions we take.

As emphasized earlier, points of view, ideas and theories can only be judged by their usefulness, by their power to enable groups of people to function in their habitat. Social constructionism can be 'evaluated' in the same way. The concept of 'usefulness' is a personal matter. From our private and professional perspective, social constructionism as an epistemology is very useful because it fits in with our holistic, systemic world view and offers a strong frame of reference to structure the world around us. So we can conclude that on a theoretical level social constructionism seems to be a valuable approach. In the next part of this paper, we discuss the more practical applications. Does social constructionism offer the same comfort for scientific research? What are its uses when applied to psychotherapy? What follows is an exercise in thought concerning these two domains we are confronted with in everyday life, and the significance social constructionist thinking can have for both.

Scientific Research

In the last decade, postmodern thinking has strongly influenced human sciences. More and more scientists have started to critically examine themselves and their research. It is particularly in the domain of philosophy that terms such as 'truth', 'objectivity' and 'rationality' are being questioned, when on the other hand, concepts as 'constructs', 'intersubjectivity' and 'discourse' are frequently being used among scientists. We can observe a striking shift to a central role for language within research, the so-called 'linguistic turn'.

Within psychology, particularly within psychological research, social constructionism was received rather lukewarm, especially because it challenges some of the most nourished basic assumptions of psychology. Throughout its history, psychology has mainly emphasized the individual. Contextual and cultural factors were minimized and

experimental research was developed 'to control' and 'eliminate' them as much as possible. And exactly these contextual factors are most interesting to social constructionism!

Let us look at the usefulness of social constructionism in the field of scientific research.

The basic ideas of social constructionism implicate questioning the 'traditional' view of science, the scientist and scientific research. Given the premise that every idea/theory is a local construction, how can we justify the role science has been getting up till now in our society? Why would a statement claimed by a scientist be more 'true' than the theory of 'ordinary people'? What role is left for science then?

In the first place scientific research has to be 'useful', meaning useful for people in a specific community. Scientific research has to help people to understand the world they live in and make it easier for them to function in that world. Secondly, scientific research has the important role of opening up (social) discussions in order to create the most extended forum. Within this reasoning, theory gets the role of 'generative knowledge', that is knowledge that produces new ideas and creates alternatives. Consequently, scientific research aims not so much at discovering the 'truth' as rather to contributing to the dialogue. This dialogue results in the creation of a common knowledge that is directed towards actions, and new agreements are made in human thinking and acting. In his book 'Realities and Relationships', Gergen takes it even further: science must contribute actively to critical considerations of moral and political topics within our society in order to aim at cultural transformation.

A direct consequence of the assumption that 'something is true' because we have agreed it is, is that the scientist himself cannot take one kind of knowledge of reality, but must move in several constructions of reality at the same time. Simply put, this means that different people can have different perceptions of the same reality. The researcher must 'be of many minds'; he or she must create space for several manners of thinking.

Let us try to find out the influence that the aforementioned statements have on conceptualizing research. As we indicate theoretical implications, we will try to illustrate them with examples from concrete research. This research started about a year ago, following a project implemented by the Flemish government to prepare a major renovation of youth care services in Flanders.

One of the implications of social constructionism is that research questions should be put in a totally different way. We should, for example, question the usefulness of looking for universal theories of child development, considering that all knowledge is a local construction. Shouldn't we concentrate our research on questions that trigger a thinking-process and open up the discussion?

In the above-mentioned research, we want to explore the process and content of the changing that is central in the Flemish Youth care project.

What about the researcher? Should we not, when conceptualizing research, try to explicate our own constructs and cultural, social and historical roots as much as possible? Questioning our role as researchers is one of the major consequences of the application of the social constructionist perspective. The notion of the expert, observing reality objectively from the outside does not hold. As a scientist, we form part of various 'meaning-creating' groups and create our views based on different discourses. It is essential to ask ourselves from which framework, values and agenda we conduct our research.

In this research the role of the researcher has been chosen as being part of the process. In the written report, the personal and social context of the researcher is being explicated.

The third necessity is to choose the questions, while fully realizing that they should always refer to local 'meaning-construction'. We think research should always envisage elucidation of local constructs, their origins, development and meaning in everyday life. Considering this, the question how someone's story relates to his actions, for example, becomes an interesting scope for research.

We opted for one of the regions where the Flemish project has been implemented, as a case study. Within the context of a middle-sized city and the culture and history youth care has in this region, we want to explore which meanings, ideas and constructs the people involved have about the occurring changes.

Fourthly, the research question, but later also our choice of methodology, is being steered by language. Access to reality is, as we described earlier, limited by language, which is the only way to create joint meaning. Language is as such the only observable component for study.

In this research, we chose to study the discourse of the people involved: government, policy-makers, care professionals and clients. Which story is created about which themes, which themes are dominant, which ones only exist implicitly?

As a result of these choices, should social constructionist methodology be fundamentally different from modernistic methodology? Although we do not want to propagandize interviews as the sole instrument, it should be said that it is the most direct way to explore constructs, in dialogue, and using the language of the participant. More generally, qualitative methodology is often considered the most adapted to research these questions. Whatever methodological choice we make, we should constantly be alert to the 'ownness' of language. Each word, each language act has a symbolic value and will be used or interpreted differently by different people. We consider it very important to contextualize people's terminology and instruments of knowledge.

We chose to use in-depth-interviews with people involved on every level and text analysis of existing documents, because they can give us insight in how different stories are being created around this issue by the people involved. The interviews are perceived as dialogues, even discussions, more than as questioning situations.

In addition to consequences for research questions and methodology, various authors emphasize the implications for the research process. Research is being created by the scientist and the participant together, and can be considered as a circular process, in which the classical sequence of defining a research question, collecting data, analysis and reporting, does not apply. Detailed planning of research before starting is no longer an option.

Our own research also started from a research question and a strong choice as to the view on science and reality, but we constantly allow our research to be altered and adapted by remarks and questions of the people involved. In our opinion, this is the only way to make sure the results will be a useful whole.

A last implication to be considered here is that the usual criteria to evaluate research, such as reliability and validity, no longer apply. Of course this does not mean that 'anything goes' in research inspired by social constructionism. Originating in qualitative research tradition and picked up by postmodern research, many an author has tried to develop 'new' criteria. Transparency and accounting for choices are central in their attempts. But what

about modernistic criteria? It is true that the social constructionist epistemology questions such concepts as objectivity and rationality and that discovering 'the truth' is not a goal. Yet, it would be in contradiction with the assumptions of social constructionism to condemn all modernistic research as useless, bad or inferior. In accordance with Gergen, we consider the relation with modernistic research traditions as a quest for surplus value.

As you can see, this perspective bears enormous consequences for different aspects of science. We will now consider a few of the implications for psychotherapy, and as the careful reader will notice, a lot of similarities will show.

Psychotherapy

Whereas social constructionism got a lukewarm reception in psychological scientific research, it has never been more popular than it is known in psychotherapy, where its influence on practice is steadily increasing, especially in the field of systemic therapy. Context and interaction are of central importance to systemic therapy and explain the overture towards social constructionism.

To make the similarities visible, we summarize the implications of social constructionism in the same order as we discussed the basic premises, earlier in this paper. Similarly, we describe the consequences for the therapist's position.

In systemic therapy, existing patterns are explored and new options are created to make new interactions possible. Several outcomes and several ways can lead to this. Therapist and client create the therapeutic process together. The therapist is 'co-constructor/facilitator'. The role of the therapist is to take part in the conversation and to facilitate the telling of stories. Important in this process is that the therapist starts from a not-knowing position. The therapist has to help to bring about change whenever change is requested. The point is to increase the number of possibilities from which the client can understand life. In this way the opportunity is offered to rearrange the reality in function of the new information the client receives during therapy. What was up till now adopted as 'the one and only truth' is finally discovered to be only 'a truth', only one way of looking at it. In therapy, the therapist and the client together are in search of a new description (or construct) of reality. Therapy implicates an ongoing thinking process.

Social constructionism fits in an interactional vision. Knowledge exists in the interactions that take place among individuals. The context is important. Giving meaning is no individual matter. Meanings are generated by communication between persons. Problems are also examined in this way since they evolve between people. Dysfunction then must be examined in the social surroundings.

Social constructionism has contributed to an approach of therapy that is mainly "language focused". Meanings are created in language. The reality has been constructed socially by means of language and language has been constructed socially as well. Therapy can be considered as a linguistic exercise. In other words, the therapist should try to help clients develop new constructions concerning their problems.

From a social constructionist point of view, therapy is a respectful dialogue. It is a shared action in which client and therapist take part together and in which they both have an equal share. Neither success nor failure of the therapy can be attributed to one of the actors of this process. The therapeutic relation is characterized by equality. Together, the client and the therapist construct an interpersonal context. The emphasis lies on the

dialogical conversation, more than on an objective diagnosis. Moreover, diagnosis is also a product of social interaction. We, as diagnostics are a component of the process that we diagnose.

Conclusion

Social constructionism seems to have similar implications on both scientific research and psychotherapy. In both cases, Researchers as well as therapists, are invited to question themselves, step out of the expert position and consider the subject or client as a primary guide through the process. In our opinion this illustrates the closeness between these two domains, breaking down barriers that are often felt in practice.

We would like to conclude by voicing our conviction that social constructionism can be very useful in both domains and has very similar assets and strengths both in research and psychotherapy. A radically different way of thinking and asking questions, results in alternative thinking paths opening up. One of the most important strengths of social constructionism is its focus on stories and discourse of people and their communities. The mapping of implicit stories and discourse, that live underground, offers opportunities to open a broad discussion, in which the dominant discourse or story can be challenged. Alternative paths are being uncovered, choices have to be justified, resulting in an emancipation effect, which, in the long term, can support personal and social changes.

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