

(Mis)constructing social construction: Answering the critiques

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journals.sagepub.com/home/tap**Diego Romaioli** 

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Abstract

This article aims to review the main criticisms of social construction (SC) after its formalization as a “movement” in the social sciences. The critiques are organized into six dominant areas that define the relationship between SC and reality, truth, language, human nature, scientific enterprise, and society. For each one of these categories, the more frequent objections raised over time by scholars will be outlined and counterarguments will be offered, centering on common misunderstandings of SC. We show how the major difficulty in embracing SC principles is attributable to the use of incommensurate assumptions and misunderstandings of the aim of social construction.

Keywords

criticism, language, pragmatism, social construction, theoretical assumptions

Social construction (SC) is a movement that emerged within the social sciences in the second half of the 20th century, and, over time, has developed into one of the most important and innovative paradigms of contemporary psychology (Hammack, 2018). The range of SC spans from anthropology to philosophy of language, psychotherapy to science of organizations, and sociology to critical pedagogy (Holstein & Gubrium, 2013). Although the idea of social construction was first introduced in the famous work of Berger and Luckmann (1966) in their volume, *The Social Construction of Reality*, the term “social construction” more often refers to the subsequent developments that have

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supported—especially in social psychology—the critical orientation of the discipline, giving renewed prominence to the historical and social nature of meaning-making processes. This approach has been promoted by the recognized contributions of Kenneth J. Gergen, including his article, “Social Psychology as History” (1973), in which our ability to compare knowledge in psychology to knowledge in the natural sciences was challenged. Gergen (1985) also proposed a movement from endogenic perspectives centering on intrapsychic variables to exogenic perspectives, in which environmental variables play a key role. With these contributions, Gergen and others initiated a movement that distinguishes itself from the initial sociological approach of Berger and Luckmann. In the latter, in fact, a distinction is maintained between an individual subjective reality and an external reality. The notion is that *individuals* construct their reality by virtue of their interactions in the world. The form of constructionism discussed in this work, however, transcends this initial dualism (internal/external) and focuses on reality construction as a relational achievement. Thus, different relational processes (involving different persons in different environments) will coconstruct different realities. The central propositions of this movement have become the backdrop for several shifts in the social sciences such as the postmodernist shift (Latour, 1987), poststructuralist shift (Foucault, 1980), and discursive shift (Harré & Gillett, 1994; Potter & Wetherell, 1987).

Today, SC is recognized as a movement whose main interest is to study how communicative processes generate forms of co-ordination that create a sense of a shared reality (Lock & Strong, 2010). Social constructionist contributions examine, with a critical eye, enduring realities—that are therefore taken for granted—and that may be dysfunctional or oppressive for some who experience them (Parker et al., 1995). The hope is to create functional realities through an increasingly pragmatic future-forming research approach (Gergen, 2014; McNamee & Hosking, 2012; Romaioli et al., 2016). Gergen (2001b) sums it up in the following way:

Constructionist scholarship has been devoted to understanding the generation, transformation and suppression of what we take to be objective knowledge; exploring the literary and rhetorical devices by which meaning is achieved and rendered compelling; illuminating the ideological and valuational freighting of the unremarkable or taken for granted; documenting the implications of world construction for the distribution of power; gaining an appreciation of the processes of relationship from which senses of the real and the good are achieved; comprehending the historical roots and vicissitudes of various forms of understanding; exploring the range and variability in human intelligibility across cultures; and more. (p. 25)

Because of the challenge SC poses to some generally held ideas about reality, objectivity, and normality, its diffusion has been accompanied by a crescendo of critical positions. In 2001, an entire issue of *Theory & Psychology* was devoted to critiques of SC (Stam, 2001), including a rejoinder by Gergen (2001a). Even earlier, Edwards et al. (1995) issued their response to realist critiques of relativism with their famous “Death and Furniture” article, where they illustrated the use of materiality in evaluating relativist perspectives. There is no dearth of literature attempting to underscore the failings of constructionist, relativist, and postmodern ideas.

Despite these critiques and the ample responses provided (Gergen, 2011; Ho, 2012; Shotter & Lannamann, 2002; Slife & Richardson, 2011), we find ourselves, decades

hence, dealing with the same critiques which, we believe, have been sufficiently responded to over the passing years. Thus, we do not aim to return to these earlier critiques but rather, to question how they persist in spite of further articulations and clarifications of SC over the years.

Although social constructionist theory has met with broad acceptance, expanding and thriving in a variety of fields, it first emerged as a movement in opposition to a positivist and empiricist science, inevitably polarizing the debate on issues considered crucial by the scientific community (Holstein & Miller, 2006). Yet, as with any theory or philosophical stance, the ability to articulate the constructionist argument has expanded exponentially over the years. In fact, Gergen (2015) directly addresses the most common critiques that SC: (a) denies the material world; (b) claims that “anything goes,” and perhaps most important; (c) claims to be the “right” theory about the social world. Indeed, SC views all theories as potential candidates for examining, understanding, and living in the social world. The question constructionists ask is the question of utility. When is it useful (and for whom and in what circumstances) to use psychoanalytic theory to assist a person with their challenges, and when is it useful to use narrative theory or behaviorism or any other theory? To the constructionist, no theory is right or wrong. One does not employ a theory because it will tell us the Truth. Instead, theories are *useful* to the extent that they allow us to *connect* with others and, through that connection, construct meaningful ways of going on together (or, put otherwise: to solve problems; to create useful policies, institutions, and practices; and to understand the social world in a way that is generative).

At this moment, it seems appropriate to engage in a dialogue with discordant voices. Our aim in this article is to provide an overview of the main objections posed to SC by scholars in an attempt to shed light on some commonly misunderstood aspects of SC that have emerged over time. Certainly, in the wake of almost three decades of critique, constructionists have attempted to illustrate that our arguments are not positioned within the discourse of right or wrong, good or bad. Constructionists are not interested in debating the veracity of one theory over another. Rather, the constructionist aim is to engage in dialogue among differing (and yes, often competing) perspectives for the purposes of forging new forms of life that assist us in confronting our world. If all theories offer a form of life, then the critical question is what form of life is useful in this moment, in this context, and for these people. Thus, our aim here is not so much to establish the “truest” or “most correct” interpretation of social constructionist thinking (Danziger, 1997; Katzko, 2002), but to distinguish more explicitly the specific levels of discourse that structure it.

Levels of discourse

Gergen (2015) notes that theories “are primarily used to sustain a given tradition of research. They are not intended to create alternative ways of living” (p. 92). Taken at this level—the level of theory—SC could be read as a theory that tells us how the world “really” is. Of course, one could (and many do) engage SC in just this manner. However, important for us is the second level of discourse concerning SC. This is the metatheoretical level where SC is understood to be what Gergen (1978) calls “generative theory” in

that it helps us generate new forms of life. Any theory could fulfill that aim. The subject of our interest is human interaction—people interacting with each other and with their environment—and, unlike other forms of scientific focus (e.g., chemical compounds, mirror neurons), the subjects of our concern are able to engage in self-reflexive critique, which is to suggest that we can comment on the implications of a given theory and decide if its explanation of human behavior is useful or not. It is this second-level discourse that we are addressing.

It is important to note this distinction. Despite many responses to the critiques of SC over the years, those critiques have been read/understood at the level of theory. This means that the assumption that meaning emerges in relation is taken as a Truth, and an objective one at that. But since the philosophical stance of SC is operating at the level of metatheory, the focus shifts from a criterion of truth to a criterion of utility. In the following paragraphs, we will explore the main critiques of social construction with reference to the concepts of reality, truth, language, human nature, scientific enterprise, and society. In the concluding paragraphs, we will propose how we might overcome the polarization of the current debate, suggesting the opportunity for a fruitful dialogue between constructionists and their critics.

Social construction and reality

Most frequently, social constructionist thinking is oversimplified in the claim that it denies the existence of reality (Burr, 1998). Objective facts such as death, gravitational force, the existence of an environment with specific physical characteristics, our own bodies, and many other things would be—according to some—evidence that SC is an erroneous theory. Thus, it would be misleading to refer to death, gravity, and so forth as “constructions” (i.e., something contingent, which can be changed on the basis of consensus among people). For example, while we could all agree with the idea that gravity does not exist, our bodies would remain anchored to the ground.

The argument stressing that SC denies reality is employed, as Edwards et al. (1995) argue, by pointing to everyday evidence of phenomena belonging to the physical realm (bodies, environment, etc.) as well as to more specialist considerations by experts who, in their own fields, aim to attribute the *status* of reality to the phenomena they study (Cherulnik, 1981). For example, some support the thesis that specific psychological phenomena are real, from cognitive processes to unconscious dynamics, from fundamental emotions to attachment styles. Criticisms, from claims of the existence of an objective material world to claims of the objectivity of some mental processes, share a common assumption: there are “real things,” which we need to engage with and relate to as researchers and human beings.

To address the realist issue, SC draws upon a crucial Kantian distinction (Edwards, 1997). This philosophical tradition aims at distinguishing theories relating to ontology—what exists—from theories more properly relating to epistemology—how we know (Edley, 2001). Although constructionists may use ontological claims for pragmatic purposes (one cannot make an argument without *appearing* to make ontological claims), constructionist metatheory does not include any purely ontological statement; what exists, exists. The language game (Wittgenstein, 1988) of “stating how things are” is a

pragmatic effect of argumentation; statements about what is real, however, do not belong to its domain (i.e., the level of metatheory). Constructionists see what we come to know as “reality” as the byproduct of our negotiations with others and our environment (within a cultural, historical, and local context). From an SC stance, knowledge is structured mainly through a linguistic *medium*, which can be considered as a meta-artifact (Cole, 1998) that makes both the act of distinction (between objects, events, etc.) and the structuring of these distinctions within a system of relationships, possible. However, Wittgenstein (1953) maintained that private language cannot exist. As a consequence, the main instrument through which human knowledge is structured is intrinsically public and conventional, that is, social. Every time we define reality, we are bound to a cultural tradition, which allows us to know reality through its systems of norms and signs, shared symbols, and negotiated agreements.

And, while reality emerges within situated language use, we must also remember that language (i.e., all action) is necessarily divisive (Bateson, 1972). With our words and actions, we divide the world into categories, and we cannot avoid doing so. Once we identify something as “good,” it is not “bad.” A movement toward another is not a movement away. For the constructionist, knowing that our words and actions create categories encourages us to reflexively ask if there are alternative forms of categorization that might be more generative.

It is important to keep in mind that every cultural tradition is capable of creating its own specific reality, which is in itself irreducible, and which cannot be comprehended without the cultural tradition that has created it without distorting it. A clear example of this can be found in the increasing number of paradigms in psychology (Romaioli, 2012). Each and every psychological tradition establishes its own reality through which some phenomena become reified: behaviorists will attribute value to reinforcement, humanists to unconditional love, and psychoanalysts to unconscious, underlying processes. These traditions have long been engaged in a fight for supremacy, more or less aimed at establishing which stance can be considered the most credible and truthful (Kuhn, 1979). However, it is not possible to assess competing traditions objectively. We can never step out of our languaging systems or, in other words, there is never a God’s eye view from nowhere. Every tradition would, in fact, privilege some criteria over others. Again, every definition of reality emerges through local agreement by an interacting community of speakers (Fish, 1980). And this is precisely the argument SC makes. It is nonsensical to evaluate a theory (a way of life) using the criteria and assumptions of a foreign way of life (theory). To that end, contemporary SC is not claiming modernist, individualist perspectives are wrong. SC is asking if they are universally and always useful.

In addition to this rather well-known reflection, SC does not deny that the world sets constraints on our constructions. Several authors (e.g., Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2013) have argued that the constructionist focus on language and human experience must be augmented by a consideration of how materiality plays an active role in the construction of meaning. However, our view of SC does not presume that the materiality of our lives is irrelevant for meaning making; every time materiality enters discourse, it becomes “something else.” Economic hardship induced by climate change has serious implications for how farmers construct their lives and their politics. Additionally, how we construct meaning very much depends upon the discourse we use. Death, for example, can

be interpreted within a biological discourse (termination of organ function), a spiritual discourse (soul migration), or physical discourse (energy mutation). All these constructions are actually limited by the contingencies of a community's form of life. In sum, the constraints set by the world are always perceived, managed, and channeled through cultural/historical constructions and can never appear as they *really* are. As Laclau and Mouffe (1985) point out:

An earthquake or the falling of a brick is an event that certainly exists, in the sense that it occurs here and now, independently of my will. But whether their specificity as objects is constructed in terms of "natural phenomena" or "expressions of the wrath of God," depends upon the structuring of a discursive field. What is denied is not that such objects exist externally to thought, but the rather different assertion that they could constitute themselves as objects outside any discursive condition of emergence. (p. 108)

We order our worlds with our linguistic descriptions (Mills, 1997). The objects of the world acquire meaning insofar as they are categorized and included in a net of relationships among categories, which is established on social grounds. As clarified by Hacking (1999) in relation to the construction of the phenomenon of "women refugees":

X refers first of all to the woman refugee as a kind of person, the classification itself, and the matrix within which the classification works. In consequence of being so classified, individual women and their experiences of themselves are changed by being so classified . . . this way of classifying people is the product of social events, of legislation, of social workers, of immigrant groups, of activists, of lawyers, and of the activities of the women involved. This kind of person, as a specific kind of person, is socially constructed. (p. 21)

Social construction and truth

There are typically two types of critical arguments in relation to the topic of truth. On the one hand, the critique positions SC as claiming "there is no Truth," in so doing, they see SC as affirming the Truth that there is no truth (Halling & Lawrence, 1999). On the other hand, some scholars maintain that SC challenges the idea of truth, thereby leaving chaos in its wake (North, 2016).

As we have already stated, the first criticism considers SC as an essentialist theory, claiming a constructionist stance to be truer than others. Probably this criticism is partially justified by the way some initial (historical) contributions illustrate their point (e.g., Gergen, 1989): in spite of the social constructionist sensitivity, opinions have been maintained and supported by means of juxtapositioning, at least rhetorically, constructionist ideas to other traditions described as limiting and oppressive. The first contributions aimed at introducing and legitimizing SC were often filled with fine-tuned epistemological analyses, with reflective criticisms of other perspectives, and sound arguments that suggested SC as, if not the truest, at least the most reasonable option. We see this as unfortunate in retrospect but understand it in the context of what passes for coherent and persuasive scholarly argument—particularly three decades ago.

While this can be justified by the contingent need to engage in a context whose rules required debate through demonstrative arguments (let us think of the postpositivist

tradition that has been practically hegemonic in the field of social sciences for many years), it must be acknowledged that Gergen (e.g., 2001b) has subsequently shifted his rhetoric, maintaining that constructionist arguments should be considered social constructions themselves (Stam, 2002). Put differently, the arguments for social construction were originally deployed within the traditional context of social science, thereby making dogmatic and allegedly objective argumentation the recognized form of argument. In many ways, the early arguments for social construction *sounded* like arguments for Truth.

The postmodernist claim of *the end of grand narratives* (Latour, 1987; Lyotard, 1984) led scholars from a variety of disciplines, traditionally considered inviolable, certain, and objective, to entertain their limits and acknowledge the historical and social conditions that made it possible to generate, legitimize, and impose their perspectives. This initial movement was followed by a warning and a new awareness that the statement “all grand narratives are constructions” may run the risk of imposing another grand narrative. This is the reason many adherents of SC have repeatedly pointed to the necessity of considering the SC proposal as a metaphor (i.e., not as a true and objective perspective but as a set of discourses, which can be accepted or not on the basis of how useful they prove to be in certain circumstances). The very idea of an objective truth is thus subverted by the social constructionist tradition that embraces *in toto* a postfoundationalist approach (Holstein, 2017). The aim of SC cannot be found in the attempt at establishing the truth of its own assumptions; it is, rather, to be found in a pragmatic sensitivity by which we are invited to consider our ideas in light of their potential implications for people’s lives.

Due to this revision of the idea of truth, some scholars maintain that social constructionist discourses may threaten the status quo. The fear is that if the community is stripped of the possibility of referring to an ultimate and objective truth, the possibility of a convergence of opinions to a common point is also uprooted. Without the possibility of referring to one truth and its objective criteria, different perspectives will never become one, with constant conflict becoming the norm. This is an extremely delicate point, which claims constructionists’ attention from an ethical and pragmatic point of view—and not exclusively intellectual. Indeed, the aim of SC is not to pursue agreement among different perspectives, but to engage them in order to reach some form of understanding and to generate ways to “go on together” through the coconstruction of these new understandings. Therefore, what constructionists suggests is: (a) the recognition of multiple worldviews, (b) multiple arguments used as “evidence” of said worldviews, and (c) once acknowledged, an attempt to co-ordinate such multiplicity. This is the central point: not to claim which reality is the “best” but to focus on the process of co-ordinating multiplicity.

Yet, despite this clarification, we need to closely examine the implications of what we have stated so far. The undeclared assumption of these criticisms is that the criterion of objectivity is, to some extent, self-explanatory (i.e., capable of convincing nearly anyone about rationality). However, history teaches us that beliefs that are considered obvious by most people can be experienced as impositions by groups who do not share them. This may happen even when the reasons for their validation are understood. Each and every belief, when closely examined, is included within a wider discourse, which may seem reasonable to those who share it. At the same time, each and every shared discourse is grounded on assumptions that are taken for granted (by those who share the discourse) and ultimately indemonstrable. We know we have stepped into the world of objective

reality when we answer the question, “Why did you do that?” with “Because that’s the way it’s done!” This utterly unreflexive answer belies the actor’s ability to consider alternative interpretations. What SC offers is a perpetual positioning of ourselves within this self-reflexive discourse.

Furthermore, objective truth always seems to emerge as such within specific criteria, which belong to a given community. This explains how every community perceives—and defends institutionally—a specific form of objectivity that is perfectly reasonable when certain assumptions are shared and, at the same time, can be radically different from the form of objectivity generated within another community. Traditional Chinese medicine has produced an extremely sophisticated body of knowledge through which to understand disease and provide remedies, some of which are evidence-based and measurable. In spite of this, from a Western physician’s perspective, traditional Chinese medicine appears to be little more than a superstition, thereby supporting the notion that Western medical science is objectively grounded. Discussing which is the most valid and objective tradition results in privileging some criteria over others, the comparison thus becoming an impossible—or at least a partial—task. In this regard, SC suggests the importance of local truths and of respecting diversity. Each and every truth is true only within the cultural and historical tradition that establishes its value.

If this were not the case, perspectives that are alternative to the hegemonic view would be thwarted and devalued, radically affecting our relationships. For example, the evidence that depression is caused by a problem in the serotonergic system is increasingly considered the officially approved version of science (Mann, 1999). Feeling in good spirits is explained in neurochemical terms and complementary discourses are put aside and labeled as prejudice and superstition. The position of a religious woman attributing her recovery to divine intervention or of a determined man who is convinced of feeling better because of his will would be considered naïve, arising from ignorance about how things and neural circuits really work. If, while looking another person in the eyes, we find ourselves falling in love, struck by Cupid’s arrow with our heart thudding in our throat, according to this perspective, it would all come down to the activity of phenethylamine, a hormone that mediates emotional reactions, here creating a bond to perpetuate the species. The point here is that even if a reality is commonly believed to be shared (murder is wrong)—one that the materialist tradition aims at detecting and examining—a wide range of meanings may be produced from it and all of them exert a significant impact on people’s lives (euthanasia is humanizing). The great variety of perspectives, including those that seem less evidence-based and more outlandish, make sense in the specific cultural life of which they are a part. Decreasing the number of reasonable interpretations would result in a diminished potential for relational resources and in an impoverished comprehension of the diverse forms of life whose structure is historically grounded on these intelligibilities.

From the above arguments, it does not follow that SC ignores very topical issues such as the need to distinguish, for instance, “real” news from “fake” news, or to understand whether or not a president is lying to people. To argue that there are many possible interpretations of a situation or that explanations of the world are not required by “the way the world is” is not to deny that within a given tradition of understanding there can be clear distinctions between what is considered true or false. If there are reliable conventions for

counting the number of people who have contracted COVID-19, ignoring such counts can lead to a biased view and contribute to undermining trust among individuals. In other words, there is no need to dismiss realism. What SC underlies is that realism—like all other orientations to the world—emerges within the discursive realm.

Social construction and language

Within the SC framework, language becomes particularly relevant. We live in language and, to the constructionist, language is more than words and text. Language entails all embodied activity. This renewed attention to language has triggered a linguistic shift in the social sciences. This shift includes a close examination of how different social groups use language/action to construct their reality, with a focus on spoken language and embodied activity, on the rhetorical and conversational devices employed, and on the political dimension of discourse. It has to be noted that SC can function in two different ways, both as metatheory and theory, and researchers can take the terms of the metatheory and treat them as a theoretical orientation to research. Discourse analysis (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), conversation analysis (Schegloff, 2007), or the even older sociological tradition of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) have initiated a thriving period for “textual data” studies. Textual data are considered privileged material for the postmodernist approach in the social sciences. In Derrida’s words, “there is nothing outside of the text” (1977, p. 158).

The increasing attention to the text, interpreted as empirical material from which to start psychological intervention, has understandably caused criticisms addressing the strongly reductionist character of this operation (Cromby & Nightingale, 1999). Some (e.g., Burr, 2003) state that SC reduces all phenomena to the discourse about them (i.e., that language is the one and only dimension of knowledge), hence neglecting relevant aspects that cannot be contained in written or spoken words.

However, language studies carried out by constructionists aim at encompassing and transcending the dimension of verbal language—though a limited one—by including more complex aspects, such as relational, communicative, and pragmatic aspects. The interpretation of language from a social constructionist standpoint is not one usually adopted by other perspectives (McNamee, 2003), where words have an essentially illustrative and representative function in social action. In fact, it is the pragmatic aspect that is emphasized. As Gergen (2001b) maintained, “for the constructionist language serves neither as a picture nor as a map of what is the case” (p. 26). He goes on to say:

This picture of language is abandoned in favour of a use-based conception in which the meaning of words is traced to the active relationships in which they play a part. Thus, the meaning of the term “aggressive” is not derived from a specific datum in the world, but from the linguistic contexts in which it is used by people to do things with each other. (p. 128)

The language we consider essential to study includes purely textual aspects (spoken or written words), para-verbal aspects (gestures and prosodies), and metalinguistic aspects (social practices and relational implications). To repeat, language, to the constructionist, entails all embodied activity; it is more than words or text, it is action. In

recent years, this specification has allowed analysis of community social practices with a focus on specific relational aspects and on the performative capability of creating new realities (McNamee, 2014).

Shifting to a methodological perspective, it can be noted that there is a pervasive belief that qualitative methods are the only methods that are coherent for the constructionist tradition. Commonly, quantitative research is viewed as addressing empirical variables in an attempt to measure them, thus assuming to produce objective knowledge of the world. On the contrary, qualitative research allows the researcher to deal with meanings, emphasizing, for example, points of view and discourses shared by social groups to make sense of themselves and the world.

But we must ask: Why are traditional methods rejected by SC? Considering the bigger picture of methodologies in the social sciences, one feeding on epistemological polarizations and methodological options that are most often considered exclusive—an interpretive paradigm on the one side and a postpositivist paradigm on the other side (Denzin & Lincoln, 2017)—we wish to point to a crucial aspect and to contribute to the unraveling of the issue. For SC metatheory, every paradigm is seen first as a social construction, inasmuch as it is rooted in cultural traditions that have contributed to legitimizing a particular view of the world, of the individual, and of science and its exploratory mandate (McNamee & Hosking, 2012). In this sense, there is no one methodology that can be considered more true and well-founded than another. All research, and the methods it employs, are first and foremost sociocultural products that derive their legitimacy from shared traditions, remaining faithful to their criteria of internal validity. That is why, instead of seeing qualitative and quantitative research methods as competing with one another, the SC view is that researchers should change the tone of the conversation. Instead of being interested in grasping what is most “true,” “valid,” or “right,” our attention should focus on the potential implications of a particular way of conducting research—on the type of reality that might be legitimized by a study, for instance, and on its consequences for the study participants and/or for society as a whole.

There are no methods or tools of choice (Gergen, 2015). Social construction is primarily a philosophical stance (McNamee, 2010): the focus is on the process of co-ordinating researchers and participants, and on what they construct together during the research activity. Gergen (2015) argues that it is not empirical methods, such as experiments, that are incompatible with social construction, but the universalistic truth claims that usually accompany them. The “objectivity-talk” of scientists becomes part of the discourse of science through which a particular version of human life is constructed. In this sense, numerical data are also a form of language and a specific way to configure reality, as are words. Quantitative and qualitative methods are essentially two artifacts that are useful to structure reality with pragmatic consequences. The question for constructionists is what type of reality will be created when this data is shared and what kind of data will speak to the intended audience and the stakeholders in the research. Again, SC exposes the impossibility for scholars to describe reality *as it really is* while prompting a discussion aimed at assessing the extent to which stated realities—perhaps supported by research data as well—invite specific forms of life that support values, practices, and specific institutional configurations.

Social construction and human nature

Some criticisms of SC come from psychological orientations that are, to some extent, similar (e.g., from humanistic, phenomenological, existentialist, and constructivist traditions). The objection of these traditions is that SC fosters some sort of “death of the subject,” (i.e., neglecting key aspects of human beings, such as subjectivity, consciousness, and intention; Willig, 2001). These are considered essential aspects of human nature, which would be flattened—or even completely dismissed, as some maintain—by the mere study of discourse carried out by social constructionists (Churchill, 2011; Sugarman & Martin, 2011). In this regard, Burr (2003) notes that:

a further problem that social constructionist accounts run into is how to explain the desires, wants, hopes and fantasies of a person and their role in the choices that person makes in their lives. . . it fails to properly explain such phenomena, which are after all very real experiences for us, and relegates them to a kind of side effect of discourse. (p. 180)

The social constructionist attack on essentialist psychology has left us with an empty person, a human being with no essential psychological characteristics. However, we certainly feel ourselves to be the bearers of personality traits, to be the holders of attitudes, and to experience emotions, drives and motivations. Our subjective experiences and individual differences still need to be explained. (p. 119)

These criticisms are relevant considering the effort and determination expressed by the adherents of those branches of psychology in introducing and dignifying the study of some dimensions of human nature. Until a few years ago, psychology was dominated by the exclusive study of objectified, empirical variables (behavior, personality traits, etc.). The assumption was that these were the only variables guaranteeing the employment of the natural science method, which had become an object of emulation.

Although, at the level of the theory, it may seem that these aspects are underestimated. SC does not intend to lessen the value of these conquests or of the actual relevance that key aspects such as “subjectivity” may have had in enriching reflections in psychology. For example, several phenomenological and existentialist discourses critique the risks of medicalizing the mind and pathologizing diversity (Laing, 1967). SC supports these movements as they mobilize minorities and reduce stigmatization that creates social oppression. However, SC metatheory does not propose a model of personhood or venture to identify some requirements of human nature as more essential than others (Gergen, 1999). Therefore, it should be noted that SC is, to some extent, parallel to these traditions since SC is primarily interested in shedding light on how the *various* models of personhood proposed by science are socially and historically constructed (Romaioli et al., 2008).

For SC, each model has value within a specific cultural tradition as it allows legitimization of some forms of life over others. Historicization of these ideas has allowed critical analyses of the concepts that, from time to time, have played a key role in the definition of human nature (e.g., the important contribution by Vico, 1999). Such analyses invite recognition of the beneficial effects that certain ideas/theories may have exerted in a given historical and cultural period, but also of the limitations that they have

inevitably produced on people's lives, tacitly influencing them. One way to summarize this is to note that SC asks, *when is it useful to employ the discourse of desires, hopes, wants, and fantasies?* Every construction is, at the same time, a possibility and a constraint. Behaviorism, for example, likens people to machines, but has spawned successful weight loss and learning programs. Phenomenological perspectives have magnified issues of diversity, thereby alerting us to the multiplicity of subjectivities, while also indirectly contributing to the support of an individualistic ideology that often has self-interest and competition as byproducts, thereby directing our attention away from communal well-being. As Gergen (2001b) maintains in this regard:

Constructionist meta-theory neither denies nor affirms the existence of any mental "entities" or "processes." The constructionist question is not whether the mind "really" exists; constructionism obviates issues of fundamental ontology in favor of questions about the pragmatics of interpretation within communities. . . Alternative conceptions of mental functioning may favor forms of life more promising to many people than the currently obvious and unquestioned. (p. 32)

Social construction and scientific enterprise

Some scholars have interpreted the SC proposal as a subversive act in relation to the scientific enterprise. The sense is that, as a cultural proposal, SC deprives science of the ultimate power of stating the truth (Skalstad, 2016). Consequently, science can no longer serve as a compass to guide people and reassure them about the correct way to interpret the world and cope with problems. Furthermore, critics view SC proposals as equally valuing different forms of knowledge, thus generating confusion and making it impossible to identify criteria under which to establish a hierarchy among divergent views.

However, SC does not maintain that one form of knowledge is just as good as another. If every form of knowledge can be understood as a social construction, then a given social construction may be more or less suitable in a specific context or moment. This means that the validity of a specific form of knowledge should be assessed on the basis of the pragmatic consequences to which its application leads in a specific domain. Paraphrasing von Glasersfeld (1984), we maintain that the scientific enterprise should not be compared metaphorically to the attempt to choose a shade of paint (knowledge) in order to match the color of the wall (reality). Rather, it should be compared to the cutting of a key that manages to unlock a door. If the key unlocks the door, it means that the form of knowledge we are using allows us to achieve the desired result. Nevertheless, the fact that the key works does not tell us anything about the ultimate nature of the door or even of the key itself.

Therefore, on the one hand, SC picks up on a central point developed within the tradition of pragmatism (Dewey, 1982; James, 1907): "what is true is what works." On the other hand, SC wants to widen the discussion on how we can assess that something actually works (Hastings, 2002). In other words, for SC it is not only relevant that one form of knowledge allows those who propose it to meet their objectives, but also that it allows assessment of the consequences of this knowledge once it is shared (e.g., in other disciplinary contexts or in society as a whole) regardless of whether such consequences were initially expected by scientists. As Gergen (2001b) asserts:

The important point in this context is to appreciate the difference between a constructionist and an instrumentalist concept of the pragmatic. Constructionism's particular emphasis is on meaningful action embedded within extended patterns of interchange. Thus, meaningful action is always consequential in the sense of bearing an interdependent relationship between what preceded and what follows. By virtue of convention, one's actions thus sustain and/or suppress that which has been and simultaneously function to create a present with future ramifications. Precisely what these "ramifications" are is open to continuous negotiation, which negotiation itself functions pragmatically in this more relational sense. (pp. 35–36)

Social construction and social/moral discourse

One of the main criticisms of SC is to consider it complicit in some sort of moral erosion of society (Hibberd, 2005). Namely, the relativism introduced by SC allegedly diminishes the significance of values that can be shared by a society, thereby paving the way to moral relativism where everything and anything can be justified. SC's relativist position also paves the way to nihilism, where there are no longer meaningful objectives to strive for (Gantt & Yanchar, 2007). In other words, taking social constructionist thinking to the extreme, murderous and evil deeds could be justified. However, the relativist option embraced by SC does not maintain that "everything is just as good as anything else." Rather, it introduces a peculiar form of relativism, one that relativizes the absolute and absolutizes the relative. From a SC standpoint, there is no ultimate criterion to state a final Truth. However, local truths, which are produced in the medium of relationships with others in specific material contexts, are essential for those who share them. Rather than claim "there is no Truth," SC claims "there are multiple truths and they must be considered in context."

The first studies in the SC movement may be regarded as "deconstructionist" to the extent that they tried to show how phenomena and events, which have long been taken for granted and considered inevitable, are ultimately shared forms of social construction (Romaioli & Contarello, 2019). Several scholars consider the commitment to deconstructing taken-for-granted realities, especially when pervasive and oppressive, to have a liberating power and to serve the aim of nurturing the critical mind, which—when shared—may allow individuals to distance themselves from institutional constraints and authoritarian ideologies. For example, let us think of the important social constructionist contributions that deconstruct the idea of mental illness (Hepworth, 1999). While whole generations tacitly suffer the consequences of the idea that their way of living is a natural aberration, many scholars have tried to show how diagnostic labeling is primarily a form of social control advocated by psychiatry; it generates a form of stigmatization based more on grounds of morality than on grounds of health (Sarbin & Mancuso, 1980). Twentieth-century epidemics such as the depression "epidemic," whose biological correlates have yet to be clarified, are presented as historically validated interpretations suitable for making sense of (and judging as negative) specific behaviors and lifestyles (Kramer, 2005). More generally, the commitment of some constructionists to show how a given phenomenon *is* a social construction aims at liberating all kinds of minorities from oppressive power and subverting the ideologies and discourses that legitimize and sustain realities that are dysfunctional or oppressive for some.

Some have taken this to mean that defining something in terms of “social construction” equates to downplaying its importance, thus considering it irrelevant to people’s lives. A person suffering from depression may even feel hurt and misunderstood in their pain by getting to know that this illness is “just” a social construction. This is indeed a crucial point to be clarified. Claiming that something is a social construction does not equate to saying that it has no consequences for people’s lives—much the opposite. To make explicit how our lives are constantly regulated by social constructions is not a way to downplay certain values or discredit a specific level of reality. Rather, as has already been argued, the aim here is to suggest the idea that such reality is not in itself immutable and that it is possible to collaborate in the attempt to coconstruct a more viable, alternative reality, one that is more socially just. Additionally, given that there is a multiplicity of truths, as advocated by SC, some may find the diagnosis and subsequent treatment of depression most useful while others may gain by understanding depression as institutional oppression. Finally, it should be restated that SC does not aim at unraveling the true nature of phenomena (e.g., by suggesting that they are *intrinsically* the product of social constructions). The social constructionist emphasis is, in fact, on the knowledge we create about phenomena and reality, on how these forms of knowledge are shaped by social/material dynamics, and on how we constantly negotiate meanings, which allow us to live in one specific way rather than another.

It is then clear how this specific form of relativism, when shared, may enable people to initially confront difference with an attempt to understand (as opposed to the standard attempt to persuade or reach agreement). In other words, free of the conviction that our point of view is necessarily more true, right, and real, we would avoid assuming both dogmatic and oppressive stances that aim at subjugating others. We would avoid defensive stances, in an attempt to preserve our identity when threatened by surrounding diversity. Finally, the idea that meanings are constructed in relationships, which operate within historical, cultural, and local traditions, prompts us to consider others and our material surroundings as constitutive parts of our way of living, thus inviting us to engage with respect and curiosity (Slife, 2004). This is not to suggest that another’s worldview would be accepted or sanctioned. The point is that a constructionist stance invites us into a different kind of interaction—one where debate over right/wrong is not the starting point. Rather, dialogue about differences—for purposes of “stepping into another’s moral order”—is preferred. In this sense, far from legitimizing discourses supporting the idea of “amorality,” SC implies an ethical attitude (McNamee, 2009) that can condense different forms of morality. This idea is linked to the concept of relational responsibility (McNamee & Gergen, 1999)—attention to the process of relating, itself—and suggests a way to be in the world that prioritizes relationships over individuals.

Metatheory, theory, and generativity

Some reflections developed by SC may seem at first reading to be contradictory and paradoxical. The reason for this lies in the dual dimension of social constructionist ideas, both referring to a theoretical perspective, whereby specific forms of intelligibility are provided, and a metatheoretical perspective, where the focus is to understand the possibility itself of theorizing. On a theoretical level, for example, it is legitimate to make

claims: “for social construction, knowledge is generated within people’s interactions” or “stating that behavior depends only on genetic variables is not coherent with social construction.” In other words, a set of guidelines characterizing the social constructionist tradition—and thus inevitably distinguishing it from others—can be identified. Many of the criticisms addressed to SC consider only this level.

The metatheoretical level introduces, however, an element of reflexivity and suggests that every form of knowledge is a social construction; SC itself being, of course, included. In this case, statements employed by SC also, in an attempt at self-definition, should be understood as metaphors or suggestions, and be assessed not as referring to an ultimate reality that it is possible to define, but for their use in everyday life. In many constructionist contributions, these two levels tend to mix together seamlessly, and it may not always be obvious to the reader from which level the author is speaking.

A further complication related to SC theory lies in its programmatic commitment to developing generative theories. As maintained by Gergen (2001b):

a major aim of scholarship from the constructionist standpoint should be the enrichment of cultural resources. In particular, through the development of new ontologies, alternative and possibly more promising avenues of action within the culture may be opened. (p. 36)

SC considers every theory to be generative: theories do not describe reality for what it is, but contribute to creating it, to the extent that a set of ideas can be shared, discussed, and acted upon within a given community. So, we might ask of any theory, *in what ways does this theory contribute to, for example, our ability to live in a sustainable and collaborative manner with each other and our environment?* Similarly, we might also ask, *in what ways does this theory diminish our abilities in this regard?* Such questions allow us to be promiscuous (McNamee, 2004) with our theories.

One initiative arising from SC regards the possibility of creating theories and supporting studies that are believed to have important implications for social change. For example, through the *Positive Aging Newsletter*, Kenneth and Mary Gergen (Gergen & Gergen, n.d.) promote studies on aging aiming to assess the phenomenon positively. Although old age is commonly thought of and experienced as a period of decline, marked by the retirement from productive activities and by an increase in diseases and social isolation, many researchers are now showing how this need not be an inevitable outcome. Several researchers suggest that advanced stages of the life cycle can be rich in opportunities, allow for initiatives, and be characterized by a higher level of well-being, interconnection, and positive mood. It is interesting to note here that many studies cited in the newsletter do not have a theoretical foundation that can be even remotely linked to SC. Why then are they cited in a social constructionist contribution? Again, the reason can be found in the pragmatic aspect of the offerings: they aim at creating more functional and harmonious realities. Quantitative data, statistics, logical arguments, and mainstream theories also contribute to enriching the discourse through which individuals create their own reality. The possibility of strengthening and amplifying some of these discourses in a selective way, understanding their beneficial effects and limitations in relation to social implications, is an objective of SC as well.

Considering scientific tools and ideas not as valid in themselves, but as artifacts that can orient, in a powerful way, the forms of life that we inhabit is a key point here. To take another example, the diffusion of psychoanalysis and of the concept of unconsciousness has radically modified the way in which people relate to one another, with largely unforeseen consequences. The purpose of constructionists is to prompt a discussion at this level, so as to enhance reflexive attitudes in the scientific community in the assessment of the outcomes of their work. The aim is to highlight the much wider effects that forms of knowledge can exert on a society and on the life of its members.

In this regard, SC's most relevant attempt to create generative theories coincides with its relational shift towards a reformulation of our self-understanding in terms of *relational being* (Gergen, 2009). These ideas have successfully affected the work of many professions, allowing a profusion of forms of practice congenial to the relational turn in therapy, counseling, organizational development, pedagogy, and so forth. But again, the reader is invited to consider the ideas generated in these contributions not as an attempt to state a new reality, a truer one that would act as an example for other realities (Romaioli, 2013). By stating that we are relational, we do not intend to point to a new discovery or to downplay discourses that, for example, stress the importance of subjective experience or that emphasize neurobiological aspects in the working of the mind. Affirming the relational nature of our selves is primarily a political act. It is an invitation to share a new intelligibility that could orient us towards forms of life that are different from the ones we know and, at least in our expectations, might be better than the previous ones. Some social constructionist proposals should be understood as language games aimed at the dissemination of alternative constructions capable of challenging what is taken for granted, thereby prompting new and (perhaps) more harmonious interpretations of reality and enhancing the creativity of groups in identifying useful actions to solve—or dissolve—shared problems.

At this point, it should be clear to the reader that the main (and persistent) critiques of SC emerge within the level of theory, a level that is often understood within realist metatheoretical premises. However, if we engage constructionist ideas on a metatheoretical level, shifting the linguistic game from “affirming what is true” to “considering what can be useful in the here and now,” it becomes perhaps easier to comprehend that the cultural and scientific enterprise of SC is not really oppositional to realist perspectives. SC does not deny reality, nor the necessity to adopt good theories and methods to study it. SC simply claims that this operation cannot take place in a neutral manner, warning that theories that profess to be apolitical can become dangerous in some circumstances. If this is the case, SC becomes quite complementary to realist perspectives, suggesting useful reflections for researchers engaged in carrying out experiments in their laboratory. Social scientists could thus begin to ask themselves: what ideas am I taking for granted in approaching reality in this way? Are there alternative perspectives to frame it? What worldview will my research results legitimize? How could people change their way of living, of thinking about themselves, or of relating when my ideas begin to circulate in society? In this case, constructionist discourses can be used as cultural resources to critically reflect on our own activities, and on how we contribute to construct particular realities and forms of life.

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