

SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM. A POSTMODERN APPROACH TO KNOWLEDGE

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Abstract

The article explores the social constructionism seen as part of the postmodern paradigm because of models relativization and reporting reality to negotiation interpreting. Social-constructionist epistemology refers to the emergence of scientific, social and cultural paradigms as the negotiation of interpretations derived from empirical reality or from other areas of knowledge such as theory, models etc. Being a theory with a philosophical framework, social constructionism focuses on the processes of understanding and addressing social changes in the postmodern society. This theoretical movement brings an alternative philosophical assumption regarding reality construction and knowledge production. According to this approach, meanings are socially constructed and the reality is moved at the level at language experience. Language, a fundamental aspect for the process of knowledge production, is not conceived of as describing and representing the world, but as a way of constructing it, being a form of social action. As a postmodern orientation, constructionism deconstructs the ontic in terms of independent existence. This approach emphasizes the ability to create realities through language, in its varied forms of presentation, stimulating a process of continuous creation.

Keywords: social constructionism, epistemology, postmodern paradigm, realities, language

Résumé

L'article explore le constructionisme social vue comme une postmoderne paradigme, grâce à des modèles de la relativisation et référant la réalité comme une négociation de l'interprétation. L'épistémologie constructioniste se réfère à l'apparition des paradigmes scientifiques, sociales et culturelles comme une négociation des interprétations dérivées de la réalité empirique ou d'autres zones de la connaissance, par exemple la théorie, les modèles. Parce que le constructionisme social est une théorie avec un cadre philosophique, il met l'accent sur les processus de comprendre et d'aborder des changements sociaux dans la postmoderne société. Ce mouvement théorique apporte une alternative hypothèse philosophique en ce qui concerne la construction de la réalité et la production des connaissances. Selon cette approche, les significations sont des constructions sociales et la réalité est changé au niveau de l'expérience du langage. Le langage, qui est un aspect fondamental pour la production des connaissances, n'est pas prévu comme décrivant et représentant le monde, mais comme un moyen de le construire, étant une forme de l'action sociale. Le constructionisme comme une approche postmoderne déconstruit la réalité objective en termes d'existence indépendante. Cette approche souligne la capacité de créer des réalités par le langage, sous ses diverses formes de présentation, stimuler un processus de création continue.

Mots-clés: constructionisme social, épistémologie, postmoderne paradigme, réalités, langage

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Rezumat

Articolul explorează construcționismul social văzut ca parte a paradigmei postmoderne, datorită modelelor de relativizare și raportând realitatea ca o negociere a interpretării. Epistemologia social-construcționistă se referă la apariția unor paradigme științifice, sociale și culturale ca negociere a interpretărilor derivate din realitatea empirică sau din alte zone ale cunoașterii, cum ar fi teoria, modelele etc. Construcționismul social, fiind o teorie cu un cadru filosofic, se focusează pe procesele de a înțelege și de a aborda schimbări sociale în societatea postmodernă. Această mișcare teoretică aduce o ipoteză filosofică alternativă în ceea ce privește construcția realității și producerea de cunoștințe. Potrivit acestei abordări, înțelesurile sunt construite sociale și realitatea este trecută la nivelul experienței limbajului. Limbajul, un aspect fundamental pentru procesul de producere a cunoașterii nu este conceput ca descriind și reprezentând lumea, ci ca o modalitatea de a o construi, fiind o formă de acțiune socială. Construcționismul ca o orientare postmodernă deconstruiește realitatea obiectivă în termeni de existență independentă. Această abordare subliniază abilitatea de a crea realități prin limbaj, în formele sale variate de prezentare, stimulând un proces de creație continuă.

Cuvinte cheie: construcționismul social, epistemologie, paradigmă postmodernă, realități, limbaj

1. The nature of social constructionism

Social Constructionism or the social construction of reality is a theory of knowledge of sociology and communication that examines the development jointly constructed understanding of the world. Social constructionism may be defined as a perspective which believes that a great deal of human life exists as it does due to social and interpersonal influences (Gergen 1985, p. 265). “Although genetically inherited factors and social factors are at work at the same time, social constructionism does not deny the influence of genetic inheritance, but decides to concentrate on investigating the social influences on communal and individual life” (Owen, 1995 p. 161). There are several versions of social constructionism with different writers making different emphases. Two distinguishing marks of social constructionism include the rejection of assumptions about the nature of mind and theories of causality, and placing an emphasis on the complexity and inter-relatedness of the many facets of individuals within their communities. Causality may exist within specific cultures but much work needs to be done before these connections can be described with any certainty (Owen, 1995). Social constructionism “involves challenging most of our commonsense knowledge of ourselves and the world we live in” (Burr 1995, p. 12). Society is viewed as existing both as a subjective and objective reality. Social constructionism focuses on meaning and power. Meaning is not a property of the objects and events themselves, but a construction. Meaning is the product of the prevailing cultural frame of social, linguistic, discursive and symbolic practices (Cojocaru and Bragaru 2012). Persons and groups interacting together in social system form, over time, concepts or mental representations of each other’s actions. These concepts eventually become

habituated into reciprocal roles played by the actors in relation to each other. The roles are made available to other member of society to enter into and play out, the reciprocal interactions are said to be institutionalized. In this process of this institutionalization meaning is embedded in society. Knowledge and people's conception (and belief) of what reality is become embedded in the institutional fabric of society (Berger and Luckmann 1996, pp. 75-77). Social constructionism can be described as part of the movement in postmodernism in that it attempts to “replace the objectivist ideal with a broad tradition of ongoing criticism in which all productions of the human mind are concerned” (Hoffman 1991, p. 1) and is inextricably linked to postmodernism as a set of lenses that enforces an awareness of the way in which we perceive and experience the world. In essence, social constructionism is the claim and viewpoint that the content of our consciousness, and the mode of relating we have to other, is taught by our culture and society; all the metaphysical quantities we take for granted are learned from others around us (Owen 1995, p. 186). From a social constructionist perspective, language is more than just a way of connecting people. People ‘exist’ in language. Constructionism focuses on relations and upholds the role of the individual in constructing significant realities (Cojocaru, Bragaru and Ciuchi 2012). Consequently the focus is not on the individual person but rather on the social interaction, in which language is generated, sustained, and abandoned (Gergen 1991). Furthermore, Berger and Luckman (cited in Speed 1991, p. 400) state that people socially construct reality by their use of agreed and shared meaning communicated through language. Thus, our beliefs about the world are social inventions. Goolishian and Anderson (1988) concur that from the social constructionist perspective there are no ‘real’ external entities that can be accurately mapped or apprehended. We are thereby forced to resign our cherished position as ‘knowers’ and our assumptions that there are ‘facts’ that we can come to know. These ‘facts’, along with other ideas and assumptions, are social constructions, artifact of socially mediated discourse. However, this does not mean that anything goes (Gergen 1985). Knowledge and systems are inherently dependent upon communities of shared intelligibility and vice versa. They are, therefore, governed to a large degree by normative rules that are historically and culturally situated. As a result, social constructionists do not claim to provide the ‘truth’. Gergen (1999) claims that in numerous instances, the criteria, which are invoked to identify ‘behaviours’, ‘events’ or ‘entities’, are largely circumscribed by culture, history and social context. Therefore, a social constructionist perspective, as opposed to a constructivist perspective, “locates meaning in an understanding of how ideas and attitudes are developed over time within a social, community context” (Dickerson and Zimmerman 1996, p. 80). Hoffman (1991, p. 5) states that all knowledge evolves in the space between people, in the realm of the ‘common world’ or the ‘common dance’. Only through the on-going conversation with intimates the individual develops a sense of identity or an inner voice. Anderson and Goolishian (cited in Hart 1995, p. 184), add that “[w]e live with each other in a world of conversational narrative, and we

understand ourselves and each other through changing stories and self-descriptions”. Social constructionism regards individuals as integral with cultural, political and historical evolution, in specific times and places, and so resituates psychological processes cross-culturally, in social and temporal contexts. The social practices of all life begin, are recreated in the present and eventually end. What social constructionism shows to be important are the ways in which “socialization and enculturation, amongst the people we have known, plus the current influence of those whom we now know, are the most active in shaping our mutual existence with others” (Owen 1995, p. 161). “Social construction talk is all the rage. But what does it mean and what is its point?” (Boghossian 2001). To say of something that it is socially constructed is to emphasize its dependence on contingent aspects of our social selves. As Ian Hacking rightly observes, however, in his recent monograph, *The Social Construction of What?* (1999), social construction talk is often applied not only to worldly items – things, kinds and facts – but to our *beliefs* about them.

2. Constructionist epistemology

The constructionist perspective can be used methodological, based on the importance of the epistemic subject in the social construction of truth. The new epistemology cannot be of quantitative and positivist type, but rather holistic and qualitative- that has the assumption that the research should include the researcher’s system and its correlation with the researched object (Sandu 2012). For example the qualitative study (Cojocaru, Bragaru and Ciuchi 2012) emphasizes the importance of the language in fashioning the future of the organizations. The metaphor used by the members was analyzed in order to obtain a picture of the way the members of an organization construct it. The experiment based on the social constructionism approach reflects that “language used by the members of an organization in order to describe it, is a social artifact not just a mirror of reality; it is an engine for social action and helps draw the map that precedes the future (guides the construction of the organization’s future)” (Cojocaru, Bragaru and Ciuchi 2012; Cojocaru 2012).

According to the nature of social constructionism, this approach is a semiotic paradigm that is based on "interpretive axiom" according to which the map through which the reality is read is not anything but a continuous negotiation of interpretation (Cojocaru 2005; Cojocaru, Bragaru and Ciuchi 2012). Any type of speech is interpreted as a "social reconstruction of reality" starting from a cultural consensus. For example, science paradigms are culturally interpreted and generate a series of models, named by Thomas Germin (1955) quantum metaphysics. Meaning of concepts, as they are taken from scientific language in cultural discourse, is a paradigmatic model, relatively independent from the scientific model of origin. Cultural derive of meaning of concepts underlies the semantic convergence of any socio-cultural paradigms (Sandu 2012). According to Cojocaru, the constructionism abandons the idea that individual’s mind is the

mirror of reality. Constructionism is based on relations and sustains the role of the individual in the construction of significant realities (2005). Language is a form of action by which the world receives constructs (Burr 1995, p. 6). The way we understand the world come not from the objective reality but from other people of past and present (Burr 1995, p. 9). Language is not simply a way of expression but through communication the world receives constructs and thus reality for us. Thereby language is a form of action (Gergen 2009). At epistemological level we can say that scientific truth is the vision of the universe that satisfies both the scientific community and the laws of their own paradigms. The constructionism itself has an “anti-naturalist vision starting from the following perspectives: the theories do not describe reality itself but a rebuilt in consciousness, going to the point where it introduces in the theory entities whose existence there are no experimental evidence or observation, but make theory coherent, consistent and with measurable results” (Sandu, Ponea 2010). We can consider the measurement of results a consequence of the theory and the way of choosing the type of experience or observation to be made and an inherent pre-quantification of results that is expected to be obtained. Thereby, the scientific theories, especially the contemporary ones, are themselves social constructs in a special form of social interaction called scientific research, and in a given social cultural and historical context called contemporary science and the scientific community (Sandu 2012, p. 105; Cojocaru, Bragaru and Ciuchi 2012).

3. A postmodern approach to Knowledge

Being a theory with a philosophical framework, social constructionism focuses on the processes of understanding and addressing social change in the postmodern society, in a wider sense, and on organizations specifically (Gergen 1994; Hosking and McNamee 2006). This theoretical movement brings an alternative philosophical assumption regarding reality construction and knowledge production. Constructionist epistemology is through its structure close to postmodernism, to Lyotard's vision according to which our picture of reality is a narration, a consensus of speech - considers Hacking (1999, p. 196). The scientific discourse is a particular form of speech and can be analyzed in a constructionist manner as textual analysis. Constructionism can be used methodological, based on the importance of the epistemic subject in the social construction of truth. The concept of truth has therefore significance in relation to a socially accepted fact or experience. Social constructionism can be applied to a series of theories that have as a starting point Gergen's work (1985, 1991, 2009). According to this approach, meanings are socially constructed via the coordination of people in their various encounters; therefore, it is always fluid and dynamic (Gergen and Gergen 2012). In the last few decades, social constructionism has been presented and embraced in different areas of knowledge in the international literature. As a field of interest about the constructed nature of reality, it has been influenced by different psychological, philosophical, and social perspectives, such as the analytical philosophy, the

sociology of the knowledge, and the rhetoric (Gergen 1994). Centering on the process of the social construction of reality, social constructionist perspectives have been used to support a variety of practices in the fields of education, health care, community work, conflict resolution, and organizations. Although it cannot be translated into a clear-cut set of guidelines, given the nature of its epistemological proposal, it has enriched a variety of research and professional practices from different fields of knowledge with a generative vocabulary, allowing innovative practices to emerge (Gergen and Gergen 2012). Some of these practices include a focus on strengths and what is already working well instead of on problems and how to fix them, an emphasis on a diversity of perspectives instead of on commonalities of ideas, transdisciplinary teams, decentralized decision making, and increased flexibility in terms of approaches and policies, all of which are informed, in turn, by an appreciation for a multicultural and polyphonic environment. Having a postmodern intelligibility, social constructionism invites a review of some modern assumptions about knowledge production, such as (a) individual rationality, (b) empirical evaluation, (c) language as representation, and (d) the narrative of progress (McNamee and Hosking 2012). Language, a fundamental aspect for the process of knowledge production, is not conceived of as describing and representing the world, but as a way of constructing it, being a form of social action. Language gains its meaning from its use in context (Burr 2003; Gergen 1994; McNamee 2004). The constructionist approach emphasizes the ability to create realities through language, in its varied forms of presentation, stimulating a process of continuous creation (Cojocaru 2005; 2013). The constructionist theory is very sensitive to changes generating new forms of practices and behavior. In times of rapid transformation in the world, social constructionism can be a useful approach to address and embrace changes in context, pointing to new possibilities of doing research and intervention. Besides this, the option for the constructionist alternative has ethical implications. It is a way of thinking and doing that moves away from expertise-based, rational, hierarchical, and result-focused models going toward more participatory, co-creative, and process-centered ones.

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