

Chapter 2

Social Constructionism

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ABSTRACT

This chapter is organized into three main sections that are to provide the reader with a foundation for understanding how Social Constructionism (SC) offers a powerful theoretical lens for studying phenomena in the field of Information Science (IS). The first section defines social constructionism and discusses its fundamental assumptions and characteristics. The second section discusses the historical development of SC as a metatheory in Information Science. In it, the emergence of social constructionism and the theoretical underpinnings and characteristics of SC that are relevant to information science will be reviewed and critiques briefly examined. The last section discusses the implications of a social constructionist perspective for methodologies and research methods for IS research. Closing arguments are made supporting social constructionist approaches to the study of problems and phenomena arising along with the constant evolution of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in the globalized information society.

INTRODUCTION

A metatheory is the philosophy behind theory, the fundamental set of ideas about how phenomena of interest in a particular field should be thought about and researched. (Bates, 2005, p. 2)

Constructionism stresses the dialogic and contextual nature of knowledge production and the dialogic and contextual nature of users, information needs and relevance criteria. . . . Constructionism understands discourse, cognition, and reality in the following manner: we produce and organize social reality together by using language. . . . The

things we hold as facts are materially, rhetorically, and discursively crafted in institutionalized social practices. (Tuominen, Talja, & Savolainen, 2002, pp. 277-278)

Volumes have already been written about social constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Holstein & Miller, 1993; Gergen, 1999; Burr, 2003; Holstein & Gubrium, 2008a). It is quite a challenge to distill into one coherent chapter the vast amount of knowledge that has been constituted, since the middle of the 20th century, about Social Constructionism (SC) as a metatheory for the social sciences; and, my aims in this chapter

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-8156-9.ch002

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are to provide the reader with a foundation for understanding how SC offers a powerful lens for studying phenomena in the field of Information Science (IS). When reading this introduction to SC, I would like readers to keep in mind that what is presented or emphasized herein is itself the result of constructive discursive activities; it carries with it the biases that come with my subjective interpretation of what I have learned before I set to writing this chapter and of the knowledge gained from new texts I read during the writing process. Therefore, from the onset I must disclose to you what influences my work as a scholar and teacher.

As an overall philosophical framework, I have embraced a social constructionist perspective; but I have, at the same time, adopted Bhaskar's critical realist philosophy, which proposes a "stratified ontology that makes a distinction between the real, the actual, and the empirical" (Sayer, 2000, p. 12). I will not discuss my approach to research further than letting the reader know that I have used a social constructionist theoretical lens to examine how we construct our professional and scholarly discourses (e.g. Closet-Crane, 2011). Because of that, the contents of this chapter cannot be neutral and readers will be presented with arguments in favor of using social constructionist approaches for IS research.

WHAT IS SOCIAL CONSTRUCTIONISM?

A Simple Definition

"Language pervades social life" (Krauss & Chiu, 1998, p. 41). As social beings, it is through language that we make sense of, describe, and generally understand the world we live in and all phenomena around us. Simply put, SC is a theoretical perspective which aims to explain how people develop knowledge collectively in all areas of life and work through language use and the consequences this has for social life.

My writing about social constructionism in this chapter is an activity which itself involves social construction; I am one link in a chain of scholars who have been discussing, defining, explaining to their peers and others, and writing about what social constructionism is since the term was first used in the 1960s. Indeed, I am relying on what I have learned from other scholars by listening to them, asking questions, and reading about social constructionism; therefore the explanations I provide in this chapter are constructed from my understanding of a metatheory that has been evolving through the interactions of many scholars in various fields. As part of an academic community of knowledge, I am using a specialized language that we have in common to contribute to the academic discourse on social constructionism. In turn, you, my reader, will develop an understanding of social constructionism and become part of the on going cycle of the social construction of knowledge.

Fundamental Assumptions and Characteristics of Social Constructionism

Now that I have provided you with a simple explanation of what social constructionism is, I will take an academic's perspective to introduce you to the more complex set of characteristics that help distinguish social constructionist perspectives from other theoretical approaches. In this section, I will discuss the epistemological and ontological stances as well as other characteristics of social constructionism.

The Social Constructionist Epistemological Stance

Epistemology is the branch of philosophy that is concerned with the nature of knowledge. In order to make clear the perspective from which we talk about our field, or approach research problems, we usually define the epistemological bases of the

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