

**David J. Nightingale and John Cromby (Eds.) (1999). *Social Constructionist Psychology – a Critical Analysis of Theory and Practice*. Open University Press, 236 pages.**

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Social constructionism has brought about a revolution in mainstream psychological thought. The philosophical and epistemological bases and underlying conceptions of social constructionism can be questioned for many reasons, one being the power of constructive criticism for future development. A second factor is that social constructionism, as a school of thought, is 'all pervasive' and the implications of this, practical and theoretical, should be clear.

The basic theme of the book reviewed here is a critique of social constructionism and an effort to contribute to its development. A panel of 16 writers, including the two editors, contributed to the volume. Most of the writers are British or were employed in English universities at the time of writing. There are also contributions from writers in Australia, Canada, Venezuela, USA and Spain. Generally speaking, there is much emphasis on British and European research and schools of thought here. British social psychology has a strong background in class conflicts and socialization problems, i.e. in issues related to social power. The power theme, in one form or another, is taken up time and again in this book.

The 14 chapters of this book have three elements in common. They all address: 1) issues of theory, 2) issues of reality vs. social constructions and 3) the question about the practical consequences of adopting relativist or materialist viewpoints.

This book achieves many aims. It serves as an introduction to social constructionism, at an advanced level. It may, metaphorically, be viewed as a detailed map of its subject matter, showing both general outlines and small details. What is more important, it shows why it was necessary to draw this map in the first place, and also which areas are still unsatisfactorily presented. To the praise of the editors, Nightingale and Cromby, I must say that they have accomplished a most difficult task in this book. Several chapters are brilliantly written, and as a whole the book is both informative and entertaining. For reasons of space, it is not possible to cover all of the themes presented in it to any depth here. I will, however, attempt to give the reader some overview.

In the introductory chapter, titled "What is wrong with social constructionism", Nightingale and Cromby argue that constructionism is too one-sided in its focus on language and discourse, to the neglect of other important psychological factors. Critics can therefore also see a book about the weaknesses of this approach as merely a new social discourse, ending in a social construction. Following this reasoning we will never be able to break free from a dis-

course using a new discourse. Admittedly, we have to use the word, written or spoken, and must accept this as our limit. This position is at the basis of the design of this book.

Now, how can it be said that social constructionism has failed? There are three themes or premises that need to be considered according to the editors.

1. Embodiment. People have - or are - physical bodies and these bodies have personal and social histories that cannot be overlooked or escaped. It is not possible to dismiss the human body as a physical entity or reduce it to a discourse.
2. The “material world” may be seen as a channel through which the social constructions flow, so to speak. Without this channel, there would not be any physical existence of persons or things. Materiality cannot be written off as a social discourse.
3. The power that is inherent in social institutions transcends social constructions. Power shapes the lives of people and limits and specifies what kind of life is possible for us as individuals. It can also be argued that power is at a higher social level than social constructions, while the material world must exist as a basis for both. Power is a material issue and is essential to the understanding of subjectivity, both topics being neglected by social constructionists.

What has been said here points in a certain direction, the possible co-existence of the social constructionist / materialist viewpoints. Social constructionists do argue against this position that it is merely a new discourse, socially constructed, like all other discourses. But this view also implicitly holds that nothing new will ever be discovered that allows us to break free from this state of affairs. The argumentation has a tendency to be circular, i.e. everything is socially constructed, therefore construction is the cause and reason for everything. The problem with the social constructionist and the realist positions is that they are mutually exclusive. One way to solve this dilemma is to say that both positions are necessary for specific purposes and must co-exist.

From one point of view, psychology is first and foremost a practice based on certain epistemological assumptions. A psychologist is expected to bring about results, to cause changes, to solve problems. In other words, psychology must justify its existence by contributing to the solution of social problems. Social constructionism is a tool in psychology, and the use of this tools means that problems and tasks are approached in a certain fashion. But this approach has consequences for all involved in it.

In his contribution to the book, Ian Parker writes about humanism as a method to explore the common sense understanding that people have of themselves and their environment. He shows how humanism can be used to make frameworks for a critical psychology that addresses the problems of social constructionism. Ian Parker’s point is to show how language and common-sense are not sufficient as a basis for self-understanding, while theory is necessary for progress in psychology. Theory does not mean a dehumanized model of people or society, theory will always be important. Humanism is also necessary in order to understand the life of groups and individuals. Furthermore, it is easy to show that social discourse often works

ideologically, but the kind of ideology that emerges from it may be merely a reflection of existing social power relations. In this case, social discourse only serves the goal of binding people more tightly to existing social power systems, and this is contrary to progress and freedom. Critical reflection and humanism helps us to be more precise about what we mean by research of good quality and our expectations regarding its uses.

Vivien Burr's chapter is titled 'The extra-discursive in social constructionism'. This chapter is well written and addresses an important topic, the neglect of the person as an experiencing subject. The focus on discourse has led many psychologists astray, away from the human body, or embodiment. The problem about some bodily experiences is that they cannot be described by language and "important aspects of human experience are located outside of language" (p. 113). A focus on extra-discursive experiences and expressions makes it obvious that life is much more than a multiple discourse. The body is more than bones, nerves and muscles; the body makes us a part of the world and we can only relate to the world via the body. Freud's theory of the unconscious recognized the importance of the bodily non-verbal experiences as basic to the development of personality. Later, psychology largely forgot the body or looked on it merely as a medium between mental activity and the environment. But there is no denying the fact that without bodies, we do not exist.

Carla Willig writes about the possibility of "non-relativist social constructionist work". She concludes that there is no necessary connection between social constructionist research and a relativism that denies the possibility of human emancipation. She concludes that social constructionist research may be transformed into a "wider historical material analysis of society that allows us to move beyond appearances and their deconstruction, and enables us to account for constructions and to transcend their limitations" (p. 50). In this chapter, Willig draws the outlines of a research program for the study of subjectivity, based on critical realist principles.

The chapter by Mike Michaels is titled: "A Paradigm Shift? Connections with other Critiques of Social Constructionism." This chapter is a remarkably good analysis of possible paradigm shifts that may come about as a result of critiques of social constructionism. In fact, it covers a lot more ground than is implied in this title: it is an in-depth philosophical and epistemological mapping-out of a most complex subject matter. Michaels argues that some versions of social constructionist textual analysis rely tacitly upon "some version of the real" as a fundament. Experience of the "real" is superior to "second-hand" experience and knowledge of science and theories. There is a possible co-habitation of the real and the socially structured, between epistemological purity and epistemological eclecticism. It is difficult, if not impossible, to escape from having one foot in the "real" and another in the "socially structured". The result is a "textual co-dependency" where social construction is the observable outcome, while the whole process is really grounded in a tacit acceptance of the "real" and the "material", existing independently of the observer. The problem here is that no two people will ever agree completely about the nature of this external reality. At the same time, "anchoring" the discourse in the "real" is necessary, for example with a reference to unalterable physical laws and "facts" of the universe. Social constructionism shows a tendency to an "either - or" form

of discourse, while many things argue for the more sensible point of view of heterogeneity, i.e. the co-existence of the socially structured and the “real”. Such heterogeneity means in practice that we have to merge academic disciplines in a “paradisciplinarity” for example, the social and the natural sciences, in order to understand man and his environment as a whole. I think that the right word to use here is a “Gestalt” of sciences, in the traditional sense the term has in psychology.

Jean Pujol and Marisela Montenegro write about alternatives between ‘pure’ discourse and materiality. They conclude that there can be no simple solution to this problem, partly because of epistemological limits that make a gap between ‘representation’ and ‘what is represented’. In other words, we have a problem with building a bridge between expressing experiences and the experience itself. The consequence this has for research is that “Research is not about the reduction of the distance between the subject and the object, but about the dialogical impossibility of its relationship” (p. 94). Pujol and Montenegro offer interesting perspectives regarding the possible solution of this dilemma.

Rom Harré presents a fine overview of the logical roots of social constructionism in his chapter under the title “Discourse and the embodied person.” His analysis results in illustrating the reasons for embodiment. A lot of ground is covered in this chapter: the narrative method and the person as a narrator, the language of feelings, the body as a tool and the nature of memory - to name a few topics. Rom Harré concludes that social constructionism has gradually slipped into idealism and lost sight of the human body as a basis of experience or, at least - a pre-requisite for experience. He argues that we must make an end to this idealism, one reason being that material distinction comes about as a result of prior knowledge and the acceptance of “scientific explanation formats”. At the end of the chapter, Rom Harré addresses “the postmodern extravaganza” and makes the important point that the “fall of logic” does not mean “an invitation to unreason” because formal natural science does not rely on logic as a primary source; it uses model-building and simulations of nature. In the latter case, logical operations are of a secondary importance: their function is to maintain the consistency of discourse. Thus, discourse does not mean “knowledge brokering” but a new window, an open door to include and reveal different aspects of “social and psychological reality” (p. 111).

Basic weaknesses of much social constructionist writing and practice are well summarized in the chapter written by John Cromby and Penny Standen, and in the chapter by Christine Kenwood. Cromby and Standen argue that social constructionism must explicitly adopt some conception of the self “if it is to continue to develop in a coherent, progressive manner” (p. 141). By forgetting the self, we may also forget the individual and the whole field of subjectivity. In her chapter Kenwood argues against the equal validity of different points of view and of equally valid truths. She points out that actions are the result of our beliefs and that people are judged by their actions and by what they say. This judgement takes place from the premises of a shared system of meaning, i.e. language. Kenwood argues that people are interdependent and individual existence is impossible without reliance on others. She concludes that human actions are never meaningless, therefore different interpretations of them cannot be equally

valid and correct. There is much truth in this, however I do not agree with Christine Kenwood when she writes that human action must always be meaningful, history has too many examples to the contrary.

Ian Burkitt's theme is that social constructionism must go beyond the discourse analysis and attempt to address issues of social relations and practice that are transformational in nature. Trevor Butt takes the position of phenomenology and shows how it can be used to analyze emotions as embodied phenomena. His main point is that phenomenology may hold the key to a reconciliation between social constructionist idealism and materialistic objectivity. Erica Burman presents a feminist view of the book and the whole social constructionism – realism debate. These authors present highly interesting topics in a clear and concise manner.

After reading this book, I felt that one main problem of social constructionism is a failure to distinguish between hierarchies or levels of meaning. Individual meaning is not necessarily the same as collective meaning – if the latter exists in a unified form, which I doubt. Take, for example, words like “art” or “justice”. These terms do have clear idiosyncratic meanings for different individuals. Will a consensus of meaning regarding them ever be reached? One basic lesson in psychology is that we are all different because of our unique experiences, while language is our “system of shared meaning”. Is this not a contradiction of terms? How can we verify that our understanding completely matches that of another person? We may believe that we share a common meaning, but we soon encounter hindrances when we try to compare personal experiences. On the surface, meaning is collective, but on a micro-level, is it not always individual? I partly endorse the point of view of the French novelist Celine, who wrote: “And you know ... experience is a dim lamp which only lights the one who bears it ... and incommunicable ...” (Celine, 1967, p. 92).

In many ways, the contributors to this book address basic philosophical questions about the nature of truth and social morality. They do so from the perspective of psychology, rather than from a philosophical stance. There are basic problems with social constructionism that have yet to be solved. For example, if every point of view is equally valid, then the destruction of social morality – so abhorred and feared by C.G. Jung, for example - may be the automatic outcome. In short: this book is a very useful source, written at an advanced level, about the essence of the relativist-materialist debate in psychology. The writers cover important issues of this debate and offer clear analyses of complex problems. The collective message of this book is that social constructionism is a useful tool, but its neglect of the human body, subjectivity, social power relations etc threaten to “create the condition for the tide of knowledge and practice simply to sweep social constructionism away”. This would be a pity, because social constructionism has its uses and has been an eye-opener to important new psychological vistas. It is however, not the only ‘truth’ in psychology, as this book so vividly shows.

*Literature:*

Louis-Ferdinand Celine. In: *Writers at Work – The Paris Review Interviews*. Third Series edited by George Plimpton. A Viking Company Book, Second Printing, New York, 1969.