

A social constructivist approach to the gathering of empirical data

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Constructivism offers a paradigm of investigative thinking whereby the researcher journeys with participants into a space of interpreted reality that is as personal and individual as each person in the collective sampling and as diverse as the multiplicity of lived experiences that are profiled. As individuals live in the world of their personal reality each interprets that reality in their own way, leading the researcher towards building a diverse and complex socially constructed landscape that profiles the collective experience without the presumption of universality. By being aware and recognising how one's own interpretations of lived experience can influence interpretation of the data, the researcher acknowledges, owns, and explicitly deals with personal subjectivity throughout the investigative process.

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Introduction

Social constructivism has its origins in the seminal work of Vygotsky (1934/1986) who postulated the notion that it was not possible to separate learning from social context. Advancing this assumption, Vygotsky established the concept of interfunctional relations and proposed that knowledge is a product of the interaction of social and mental functions whereby each individual mentally constructs a world of experience through cognitive processes. Also described as interpretivism, social constructivism can be defined as a worldview wherein individuals seek understanding of their known world in a manner that is of their own experience (Creswell, 2013; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Mertens, 2010; Schwandt, 2003). From a platform of social constructivism, persons interpret their world through a subjective lens which, from a philosophical perspective, influences and is influenced by epistemological, axiological, and ontological positions that define their lived reality (Boyland, 2018). As individuals live in the world of their personal reality each interprets that reality in their own way leading the researcher towards building a diverse and complex socially constructed landscape that profiles the collective experience in terms of individual knowledge, actions and beliefs, and personal experience: without any sense of universality.

According to Schwandt (2003), a construction can be

viewed as knowledge and truth being created by the mind in correspondence with something real in the world. This would seem to be consistent with the ideas expressed by Berger and Luckmann (1966/1975/1991), who postulated the notion that knowledge is created by the interaction of individuals, and the influence that one individual has upon another individual. It would also seem to be in agreement with the ideas of Hammersley (1990) who claimed that while reality is socially defined, it also refers to the subjective experience of everyday life and is about how the world is understood rather than about the objective reality of the natural world.

Drawing on conceptions developed by Gergen (1991) and Ginter et al. (1996), Cottone (2001) argued that social constructivism highlights the notion that what is real is not objective fact. Rather, social constructivism allows for a biosocial interpretation of what is real. Cottone's claim is that the reality of the individual gives way to relational reality where all that is known is known through biological and social relationships, is grounded in the biology of cognition, and evolves through interpersonal interaction and agreement about what is fact.

Social Reality

In debating the notion of social reality, Finn (2002) argued that the whole issue of constructivism versus realism arises only in the context where the metaphysics of the freedom of will is accepted. In defence of his argument, Finn proposed a position that could be defined in response to the following rhetorical questions – Is not reality constructed by our own activity? Is not social convention constructed out of individual

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beliefs? Do we not collectively invent the world rather than discover it? According to Lincoln and Guba (2000), the belief is that knowledge encapsulates local and specific constructed realities and varies in accordance with the individual and the situation. In considering epistemological practicalities, they define the aim of constructivist inquiry as being about understanding and reconstruction; where the nature of the knowledge to be understood relates to individual reconstructions coming together around consensus.

Knowledge is accumulated through informed and sophisticated reconstructions and vicarious experience while the quality of the criteria relies on trustworthiness and authenticity. From an axiological perspective knowledge is propositional, in that it is underpinned by a transactional knowing deemed to be instrumentally valuable as a means to social emancipation. General values are formative in that they are inherent in the developing nature of the research with the specific values of altruism and empowerment being promoted and with there being an intrinsic ethical tilt towards revelation as the constructivist researcher moves towards a praxis of participation where the focus of concern is on “liberation from oppression and freeing of the human spirit” (Lincoln and Guba [2000], p. 169). Action is intertwined with validity: that is, it is purposeful and the means is justified by the end. Profiling a constructivist perspective on the link between knowledge, action, and the impact on the relational *Self*, Lincoln and Guba proposed that the ensuing ontology is grounded in principles of relativism. Therefore, from a platform of constructivism, a universal and absolute truth is unattainable.

Methodology incorporates both hermeneutics and logic, where principles of interpretation are suspended in the common language that is shared and understood by both researcher and participant. Neimeyer and Levitt (2001) proposed that constructivist methodology elucidates local rather than universal meanings and practices; focusses on provisional rather than essential patterns of meaning construction; considers knowledge to be the production of social and personal processes of making meaning; and is more concerned with the pragmatic utility of validity of application than with validity per se. It is this focus on distinctive patterns or processes of constructing meaning in a given personal or social context without the presumption of universality that differentiates constructivist methodology from traditional knowledge claims and it is these very distinctive patterns that set constructivist methods apart from constructionist methods, where attention is shifted to broader systems that characterise cultural contexts.

From an alternative perspective, similarities with constructionism reflect Owen's hypothesis that the inherited and developmental aspects of human nature and all other aspects of humanity are created, maintained, and destroyed in interactions with others (Owen, 1995). Such a hypothesis could give rise to the notion of a social construct as defining meaning or connection assigned to objects, situations, and happenings in the environment. Owen also referenced the notion of defining meaning to people's conceptions of their relationships to and their interactions with these objects and events. Therefore, it could be suggested that while a specific social construct might be an idea or notion that appears to be natural and obvious to the people who accept it, it may or may not represent reality as a statement of fact or as something that exists independently of ideas or perceptions that are universally held about it.

In further consideration of the social context, Kukla (2000) proposed the notion that social facts are the clearest

example we have to constructed facts, with social convention being constructed out of individual beliefs and intentions. He also claimed that for this to be so, a certain kind of constructive activity needs to have taken place. In support of his argument, Kukla introduced the notion of a “quark”,¹ maintaining that constructions are fashioned out of social episodes whereby constructive activities constitute the fact.

While analysing social constructivism according to the aims of science, Khalifa (2010) identified social constructivists as holding to the notion that things taken for granted are actually products of social contingencies. He identified a philosophical pull between strong constructivism and weak constructivism – the “strong” thesis being that facts are constructed; and the “weak” thesis claiming that if scientific practices were different, hypotheticals would not be postulated as fact. Suggesting a middle path, Khalifa's claim was simply that if social conditions were different, conceptions about reality would be different.

From a perspective of standing on middle ground, the short explanation of constructivism postulates that the aim must have something to do with social conditions while also satisfying some plausibility condition. In both data collection and data analysis, concern lies with the pragmatic utility of validity of application and the specific social construct appears to be natural and obvious to the people who accept it. The collective narrative that emerges from the data corpus² profiles a landscape that encapsulates this world of lived experience which, as well as not representing reality as a statement of universal fact, acknowledges that the reality of the lived experience is something that exists independently of ideas or perceptions that are universally held about it.

Knowing, Doing, Being

Marton and Booth (1997) put forward a constructivist position when they expressed that conceptions of reality are aspects of individual awareness that exist in some latent form and can be brought to a reflected or thematised state through the researcher's interventions during the course of interview. Thus it is that the authors posited the notion of seeing individuals as the bearers of different ways of experiencing which, for Prosser (2011), is contextualised through the visual when stated as, “how humans ‘see’ is part nature and part nurture: being governed by perception that, like other sensory modes, is mediated by physiology, culture and history” (p. 479, internal quotation marks included in original text).

Berger and Luckmann (1966/1975/1991) referred to the notion of everyday life presenting as a reality, interpreted by individuals as being subjectively meaningful as a coherent world organised around the “here” of the body and the “now” of the present (pp. 19-22). They identified thought processes as being shaped by conditions in the social setting within which they occur. These same authors also emphasised the point that all social facts are defined as including elements of human thought, understanding, and meaning: whereby constructing multiple realities.

In a similar vein Owen (1995) suggested that the tool of knowing is inevitably the subjectivity of the people themselves and while acknowledging that each human being is an individual, it also needs to be acknowledged that humans are part of a shared collective of aims, values, and experiences. Referencing the conventions of “individualism”³ and “groupism”⁴,

Owen maintained that it is only through the integration of both arguments, that contextual thinking can be produced whereby the personal qualities of the individual and the impacting social forces are seen in parallel as a co-construction of the individual in community. As Owen argued, just because we can each say, “I” and because we each have a separate body, does not mean that thoughts and emotions are located solely within the individual. Rather, thoughts and emotions exist between individual human beings who can be said to construct a shared social reality: such as may reflect Siegel’s notion of the neurobiology of “we” (Siegel, 2008) and Jung’s paradigm of the collective unconscious (Jung, 1933/2001; 1936/1991).

The approach of human beings constructing a shared social reality was also posited by Berger and Luckmann (1966/1975/1991), who suggested that much of the individual’s personal space is intimately influenced by others who are around. In particular, are those with whom the individual interacts on a daily basis, sharing the world of everyday intersubjective immediate experience and using both verbal and non-verbal communication to influence the dialectics of social reality. Encountered social facts affect and condition human beliefs and conversely, human beliefs affect the social facts of the lived experience. Berger and Luckmann also claimed that the influence of others with whom the individual is intimately connected can impact to such a degree, that any clear boundary of “what is mine” or “who I am” can become blurred. They further argued that as individuals are interdependent with others, when the boundaries become blurred an individual can become dependent on others in sustaining personal well-being.

The notion of an integrated construct was also explored by Ashby (1952) and Powers (1973/2005, 1998) who referred to human beings as being essentially intricate control systems who behave as a means of defending essential variables (Ashby) and intrinsic variables (Powers) against external disturbance. These variables are said to include basic physiological fluctuations in body temperature, blood pressure, and/or blood glucose levels. Also included are higher order disturbances to the firing of cortical neurons and synaptic integration that influence perception, cognition, and action that is crucial to the holistic well-being of the human system. Ashby and Powers claimed that these essential/intrinsic variables need to be maintained at optimum levels – or at least, maintained within non-lethal limits required for efficient operation and survival.

Criticism of Social Constructivism

Critics of social construction have claimed that it rejects criticism, is too subjective, and avoids conflict (Ratner, 2005). However, in addressing such criticism, Gergen (1999/2009) postulated the notion that the major question within a framework of construction is not one of objectivity; but one of utility. Gergen also referenced the need for the researcher to take a critical stance towards taken-for-granted knowledge in favour of generating understanding of people’s lives and appreciating the challenges that people confront. Through the sharing of first-hand experience, people are encouraged to tell their story in their own terms – a story of reality as it is lived: from moment to moment, day to day, week to week, year to year.

Validity In Outcome

Distancing the Self from a taken-for-granted stance is actualised through incorporation of processes of analytic bracketing which, as defined by Braud (1998), are about attempting to remove biases while seeking to provide as clear and pure a channel as possible: one that is free from impeding and interfering preconceptions about the research topic. Braud also claimed that employing strategies to quiet the interference of bias and to allow access to the embodied truths as described by participants enhances the validity of empirical evidence that constitutes raw data. By being aware and recognising how one’s own interpretations can influence interpretation of the data, the researcher acknowledges and explicitly deals with personal subjectivity throughout the investigative process. How one deals with personal interpretation and acknowledges and deals with personal subjectivity is essentially determined by which philosophical approach best suits the specific research project; promotes the most rigorous, authentic, and trustworthy interpretation of the data; and produces the most valid interpretation of how persons conceptualise the lived reality of their world.

If dealing with the data from a descriptive point of reference as postulated by Husserl (1929/1960/1982), one comes with a view that the *object* of investigation is an intentional structure that is understood in terms of the context. What one brings to this particular context is a plethora of prior experience and assumption which must be purged or bracketed in order to attend to the actual phenomenon that is the focus of both attention and intention. If dealing with the data from an interpretative point of reference as postulated by Heidegger (1927/1962), one comes with a view that the subject of investigation is about one’s presence in the world that is defined by the context. According to Heidegger, above all else, we are “beings in the world” (p. 83) and it is how we *Be* in the world that defines our lived reality. In essence, from a platform of description, the focus is on the *epistemology* of the object and from an interpretative platform, the focus is on the *ontology of the subject*.

From the hermeneutic position as explained by Romanyshyn (2010), there is no way to step outside the work of interpretation and no way to stand apart from it:

The researcher is an encircled researcher . . . [and] enters into the circle with his or her prejudices. . . . [which] are the way into the text where they are challenged, transformed and lead to a different understanding of the text, a circular process that is on-going within an infinite horizon of possibilities (p. 317).

As contextualised by Marton and Booth (1997) and Sandberg (1996), it is interpretative awareness that is embodied in a bracketed reduction of personal experience, enabling the researcher to avoid generation of description that is beyond evidence generated by participants. With the locus of inquiry being to profile distinctive patterns of constructing meaning within a defined social context, participant sampling is ideally oriented towards enabling the most comprehensive and valid profiling of relevant data, while portraying a holistic snapshot of individual rather than universal reality.

In Conclusion

Constructivism offers a paradigm of thinking whereby the researcher journeys with participants into a space of interpreted

reality that is as personal and individual as is each person in the collective sampling and as diverse as the collective of lived experiences that are profiled. Constructivist research demands a fluidity that requires the researcher to adopt a view that each participant constructs reality differently. These differences stem from the various ways individual participants acquire, select, interpret, and organise the knowledge that they bear and the information that they are willing to share in the telling of a story that identifies as a world of personal reality.

Participant sampling is oriented towards enabling the most comprehensive and valid profiling of relevant data while portraying a holistic snapshot of individual rather than universal reality. The social constructivist researcher positions the dialogical self of *I*, the researcher,⁵ so as to provide each participant with opportunity to reconceptualise, reframe, re-construct, understand and make meaning of the reality that is his/her lived experience. Such is the position that best serves the need of the individual participant to capture what Shotter and Gergen (1994) described as a knowing from within expressed as conversational knowing. By intertwining speaking, listening, hearing reflexively and seeing within a process of dialogic interchange, living dialogue emerges into conscious awareness.

There is also acknowledgment that emotion is integral to the process and that *Self* states are dynamically organised and reorganised from moment to moment in a unified sense of Being and presence which as defined by Heidegger (1927/1962), is about Being-present-at-hand or Being-present-in-the-world. In that presence, Heidegger suggests that one is concernfully absorbed with that which may be akin to what Murray (2005, 2016) refers to as *the world that is*. It is Being-there, concernfully present with *Other* – be that another individual person, multiple other persons, or the unconscious states of *Self*. The emerging hypothesis suggests that the way of *Being-in-the-world* is incomprehensible in isolation from *knowing* about the world and *doing* what needs to be done so as to survive the lived experience of being in the world. In essence, *Being* is about Being-there. Thus, it is implied that understanding the way of Being-there or Being-in-the-world or Being-present-in-the world is also incomprehensible in isolation from an insight into the world where the participant is concernfully absorbed (Boyland, 2018).

From a constructivist perspective, data gathering and data analysis processes seek to elicit an understanding of how persons create their knowledge constructs and how these constructs contribute to understanding social influences and individual thought processes. When the locus of inquiry is to profile distinctive patterns of constructing meaning within a specifically defined social context without the presumption of universality, a constructivist methodology is ideally suited for engaging with a target demographic that encompasses constituencies with a focus on individuals, families, workers, students, children, parents, adolescents, caregivers, professional associates, recreational/sporting organisations, cultural/religious/gender groups, and multiple other social constructs within the community of human experience.

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Bio

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Footnotes

¹A hypothetical postulated as a fact (Kukla, 2000, pp. 60-62).

²All data collected is referenced as the "data corpus": terminology used by Braun and Clarke (2006) as a tool to define and differentiate elements of data in the process of thematic analysis.

³According to Owen, "individualism" regards human behaviour as the result of personal choices, grounded in the individual's values and unique personal characteristics.

⁴According to Owen, "groupism" holds the view that human behaviour can only be understood within its overall social context wherein individuals are influenced by the people around them much more than by their own trait.

⁵Reflection of Dialogical Self Theory as constructed by Hermans, 2001; 2012.